

# **SANTA BARBARA COUNTY CORONER'S BUREAU**

## **STILL A SUBSTANDARD FACILITY**

### **SUMMARY**

The 2019-20 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) inspected the facility and operation of the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau (Bureau). The Jury noted lack of compliance with new standards. The facility was built with County inmate labor in 1987 and has been in continuous operation since 1988. While the building may have been adequate thirty years ago, it does not meet national standards in 2020.

This Jury researched the reports of earlier Santa Barbara County Grand Juries and saw that many of their recommendations have not been implemented. As a result, the Bureau and its facility remain outdated. The current Jury found there is still an urgent need for a new facility that meets the industry standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **BACKGROUND**

The 2012-13 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury report on the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau found that the facility was in need of a significant upgrade. The report concluded that the facility was not in compliance with *California Code of Regulations (CCR); Title 8, Section 5199* California Occupational Health and Safety Administration (Cal/OSHA) regulations applicable to facilities where autopsies are performed. That Jury recommended that the facility should meet industry standards with the capability of being accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners. The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury determined that the facility was still non-compliant. The 2015-16 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury also confirmed that the facility was still not compliant and stated that there was an urgent need for a new facility. The Jury also reiterated the need for improved ventilation for the autopsy room.

In 1987, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner (Sheriff-Coroner) requested that the Board of Supervisors (BOS) provide emergency funds to construct a stand-alone facility. The facility was intended to handle all aspects of investigating the cause and manner of death, as required by California law. Upon recognition of the emergency need, the BOS approved and directed the construction of a facility to be built on County-owned property on San Antonio Road. The building was constructed using inmate labor from the County Jail. The 2012-13 Jury stated that there is no record of a building permit on file, indicating the building never went through the normal review and approval process.

According to the 2012-13 Jury, the original building plan called for two autopsy rooms, a refrigeration unit and two offices for staff. The second autopsy room was never utilized and became a toxicology lab. It is now currently used for storage and a break room. A second building provides additional office space for staff. Since 2013, major upgrades have included an emergency back-up generator to the main building and an improved ventilation system for the autopsy room.

Santa Barbara County has had a Sheriff-Coroner as the head of the Coroner's Bureau since 1947. In California, the sheriff is also the coroner in 41 of 58 counties. California is only one of three states which permit the sheriff to also be the coroner. In response to this and other issues

regarding possible conflicts of interest, in 2018, the California State Senate passed SB1303 requiring all counties with a population in excess of 500,000 to separate the roles of sheriff and coroner. Governor Brown vetoed the bill.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Jury reviewed the duties and functions of the Coroner's Bureau by visiting the facility and interviewing staff. It also researched previous Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Reports, state legislative reports, Cal/OSHA regulations, and the standards of the National Association of Medical Examiners and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff is the Sheriff-Coroner. Santa Barbara County joined 40 other counties using the Sheriff-Coroner model in 1947. The remaining 17 counties have either a medical examiner or a lay coroner. The Sheriff-Coroner is not subject to mandatory state or national accreditation. A medical examiner model operates under more stringent regulations and must meet national accreditation and quality assurance standards. Moreover, the Sheriff-Coroner is not independent from law enforcement supervision.

The Santa Barbara County Coroner's Bureau is currently staffed by a sergeant who is the supervisor, four coroner's investigators, one full-time pathologist, two extra-help technicians, and one administrative office professional.

The Bureau staff state that they review approximately 1500 deaths and conduct between 700 and 800 death investigations annually. The Pathologist, on behalf of the Sheriff-Coroner, determines a deceased person's time and cause of death, often in the case of sudden or unexpected deaths. The Bureau staff identify bodies, notify the next of kin, and return personal belongings to the family. They work with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff and city police departments within the County to investigate suspicious or violent deaths. The Santa Barbara County Coroner creates death records that can be used in criminal investigations, to resolve insurance claims or to monitor Santa Barbara County public health.

In Santa Barbara County, all autopsies are done in one room. The Bureau does not have an isolation room to handle high risk cases to prevent the possible transmission of air-borne pathogens. After many reports from previous Grand Juries, the ventilation system in the autopsy room was finally updated in 2017. It is now designed to cause negative air pressure in the autopsy room to prevent pathogens from entering other parts of the building from the autopsy room. However, the discharge from the ventilation system, installed on the roof above the autopsy room, is not monitored and possible aerosolized pathogens might be discharged into the atmosphere.

Autopsies are performed on gurneys, not on a stainless-steel table, and there is no dedicated dissection table. It was observed that the gurney used for the autopsy is cleaned by hand and drained by lifting and tilting the gurney in order to drain the residue into the sink in the autopsy room.

The Bureau lacks other preventive measures to safely protect staff and equipment. There is no transition room for staff to remove protective clothing and clean up. There is no equipment to sterilize instruments used in performing autopsies. Although instruments are cleaned with soap and water, cross-contamination cannot be avoided. It was observed that there was no eye-wash

station located in the autopsy room when this Jury inspected the Coroner's Bureau in October 2019. However, that has since been rectified and there is now an eye-wash station in the autopsy room.

There is a refrigerated room where bodies are placed in body bags and stored on racks within the room. The facility has a back-up generator in the event of a power failure. Outside the main building in a secure area there is an additional refrigerated unit capable of storing two bodies and an industrial scale to weigh bodies. The weight of the body is determined after deducting allowance for the body bag and the gurney.

Recently, the Bureau has acquired a machine to analyze DNA for identification of victims. This saves time and money by eliminating the need to send samples to an outside lab, which could take weeks to obtain results. This valuable resource can now perform the identification and obtain results in a few hours.

## **CONCLUSION**

As has been reported by many previous Grand Juries in 2012-13, 2014-15 and 2015-16, and reconfirmed by the 2019-20 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner's facility should be replaced as soon as possible. The Jury finds that the serious inadequacies of the facility jeopardize the health and safety of the staff and the public.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors establish an independent Coroner's Bureau, one that can be accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners. Santa Barbara County has recently faced many deaths from natural disasters, man-made emergencies, accidents and pandemics. There should be a new, fully accredited facility to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Finding 1**

The current building, constructed in 1987 and adapted to be the Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau in 1988, does not meet National Association of Medical Examiners standards.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors allocate funding for a facility specifically designed as a Coroner's Bureau, built to meet the current recommended standards of the National Association of Medical Examiners.

### **Finding 2**

There is one autopsy room, no toxicology lab and no isolation room dedicated to handle high risk cases.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors specify that the Coroner's facility be designed with two autopsy rooms, a toxicology lab, an isolation room, and a refrigeration room.

### **Finding 3**

Discharged air from the autopsy room ventilation system is not monitored, resulting in air-borne pathogens being discharged to the atmosphere.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner monitor discharged air and ensure that no air-borne pathogens are discharged into the atmosphere.

### **Finding 4**

The bodies are placed in the refrigeration room in body bags and stored on racks.

### **Recommendation 4**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner provide a more modern method of body storage such as refrigerated drawers.

### **Finding 5**

An industrial scale is located outside the Sheriff-Coroner's building.

### **Recommendation 5**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner install a body scale within the Sheriff-Coroner's building to determine accurate weight, without consideration of the weight of the body bag or the gurney.

### **Finding 6**

There is no stainless steel dissecting table with wash down equipment in the autopsy room.

### **Recommendation 6**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner install a stainless steel dissecting table with dedicated drainage in the autopsy room.

### **Finding 7**

The residue from autopsies drains into a sink, which is discharged into the public sewer system.

### **Recommendation 7**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner handle residue from autopsies as biological hazardous waste.

### **Finding 8**

All instruments are manually cleaned with soap and water. This is a safety hazard and cross-contamination between autopsies cannot be avoided.

### **Recommendation 8**

That the Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner install an autoclave to ensure all instruments are sterilized after cleaning.

### **Finding 9**

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau is not accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners.

## **Recommendation 9**

That the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors require that the Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau meet the standards for accreditation set by the National Association of Medical Examiners and the National Academy of Sciences, as recommended by the U.S. Department of Justice.

## **Finding 10**

In Santa Barbara County, the Sheriff is also the Coroner.

## **Recommendation 10**

That the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors separate the Santa Barbara County Coroner position and make it independent from the Santa Barbara County Sheriff when the current Sheriff-Coroner's term expires.

## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSE**

Pursuant to *California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05*, the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations with the specified statutory time limit:

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree wholly
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with brief summary of implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with analysis completion date of no more than six months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented, with an explanation of why

### **Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days**

Finding 1, 2, 9, 10

Recommendation 1, 2, 9, 10

### **Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner – 60 days**

Finding 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

Recommendation 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8