

Office of the Sheriff



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BILL BROWN
Sheriff - Coroner
CRAIG BONNER
Undersheriff

July 31, 2024

Eva Macias
Foreman, SBC Grand Jury
Santa Barbara County Courthouse
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
emacias@sbcourts.org

Re: Response to the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report Entitled "*Santa Barbara County Coroner Facility and Equipment: A Hazardous Environment*"

Dear Foreperson Macias,

Enclosed, please find the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office response to the 2023 – 2024 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report entitled "*Santa Barbara County Coroner Facility and Equipment: A Hazardous Environment.*"

As requested in the report, the Sheriff's Office is responding to Findings 1, 2, and 3 and Recommendations 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e, 2a, 2b, and 3.

Should you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me at (805) 681-4290.

Sincerely,



BILL BROWN
Sheriff-Coroner

Enclosure: The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office response to the 2023 – 2024 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report entitled "*Santa Barbara County Coroner Facility and Equipment: A Hazardous Environment*"

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office
Response to the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury 2023-2024 Report
"Santa Barbara County Coroner Facility and Equipment: A Hazardous Environment"

Findings and Recommendations

Santa Barbara County Sheriff: 60 Days

Finding(s): 1, 2, and 3

Recommendation(s): 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e, 2a, 2b, and 3

The Santa Barbara County Coroner's facility has faithfully served the community for the past 50 years, but it is now in critical need of total replacement. Originally designed to meet the needs of a much smaller population, the current facility is outdated and unable to support the demands of a growing community. Over the years, the facility has faced numerous structural and environmental challenges, including roofing, ventilation, and mold issues, which have raised serious concerns about the safety and well-being of staff and visitors.

Like any county agency, the Sheriff's Office relies on the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to approve funding for capital and ongoing projects. While the demolition and construction of a new Coroner's Facility is included in the Calle Real Campus Master Plan, this project is scheduled to be completed in at least 15 years. The urgency of the situation necessitates more immediate action; the Board of Supervisors has the authority to prioritize funding for this vital project and expedite its completion to ensure the safety and efficiency of coroner operations. By making this a priority capital project, the Board can address the pressing needs of the Coroner's facility, safeguard public health, and enhance the capability of the Sheriff's Office to serve the community effectively.

Immediate investment in a new facility would mitigate the risks associated with the current hazardous environment and provide a state-of-the-art workspace that meets modern safety and operational efficiency standards. This would protect the health of the coroner's staff and visitors and ensure the integrity and accuracy of the critical forensic work performed at the facility.

FINDING 1

The buildings that the Coroner Bureau occupies are dangerous to the health and safety of the Coroner Bureau staff; they present an ongoing health hazard to everyone who works there.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Disagree partially with explanation

We respectfully disagree with this statement based on the significant modifications and improvements that have been made to the Coroner Bureau's facilities. These upgrades include:

1. Facility Modifications:

- **Decedent Storage/Autopsy Suit:** In 2014, we removed the door between the decedent storage and autopsy suite to enhance workflow and safety. This modification was made to eliminate odors in a publicly accessed area and to prevent cross-contamination between the autopsy suite and areas accessed by the public and personnel not wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). This adjustment completely separates the potentially contaminated areas of the facility from the office areas occupied by our personnel.

- **Autopsy Observation Window:** In 2014, an observation window was installed to limit the number of individuals required to be physically present in the autopsy suite, during an autopsy, thus reducing potential contamination and exposure risks to non-Coroner personnel not wearing full PPE.

- **Negative Airflow System:** The negative airflow system in the autopsy suit was upgraded in 2014 to a system that was specifically engineered to ensure a safer environment by effectively managing air quality and reducing airborne hazards. The system still functions efficiently and properly.

2. Ongoing Improvements:

- **Roof and Structural Enhancements:** The County of Santa Barbara General Services has made substantial investments, including installing a new roof and structural improvements, in June 2024, to address existing concerns.

- **Mold Abatement:** In July 2024, General Services has undertaken comprehensive mold abatement measures to ensure the health and safety of all personnel.

3. Additional Corrective Actions

- **Bathroom Ceiling:** The unfinished work noted by the Grand Jury on the bathroom ceiling has been corrected and completed through General Services in June 2024.

- **Walkway Replacement:** The rotting walkway into the detective's office mentioned in the report has been removed and replaced through General Services in July 2024.

4. Personnel safety and OSHA compliance

a. In 2014, the Sheriff's Office instituted a comprehensive Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP) that is specific to our Coroner's Unit facility and functions. The comprehensive IIPP includes general safety, bloodborne pathogen safety, Respiratory Protection and Airborne Pathogen protection components.

i. This included evaluating, refining, and expanding the respiratory protection equipment available to and utilized by our Coroner staff.

b. The IIPP includes extensive policy, procedure, and training for all personnel assigned to the Coroner Unit

While the Sheriff's Office and General Services have gone to great lengths to ensure that the facility is safe, it is nevertheless antiquated, in some ways substandard, and in need of replacement. We concur with the recommendation that funding should be secured for a new facility. The County has proactively included the construction of a new Coroner's facility as part of the Calle Real Campus Master Plan, demonstrating a commitment to providing a safe and modern environment for the Coroner Bureau staff and the community. Given the enormous expense of the Calle Real Campus Master Plan, the county should consider replacing the Coroner's facility as a higher priority.

Recommendation 1a

The Jury recommends the installation of new roofing, including the replacement of accompanying support beams as needed, by a licensed roofing contractor, and not by handyman employees or janitorial staff from the Sheriff's Office or General Services. Repairs shall be completed by the end of the third quarter of the calendar year 2024 or sooner.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken

We are pleased to report that a new roof was installed by a licensed roofing contractor, in June 2024, and the accompanying support beams have been thoroughly inspected, with necessary replacements made. This project was completed ahead of the recommended timeline. These actions reflect the county's commitment to maintaining a safe and functional environment for the Coroner Bureau staff.

Recommendation 1b

The Jury recommends a licensed professional mold abatement contractor be hired to assess whether there is active mold and, as necessary, conduct all required eradication efforts. Repairs shall be completed by the end of the third quarter of calendar year 2024 or sooner.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken

Mold abatement efforts were initiated by SBC General Services via a licensed contractor and commenced in July 2024. The process includes removing all suspected mold, scraping the ceiling, removing old carpet, treating the walls, and applying new paint to the interior. Following these procedures, new carpet will also be installed. This project will be completed in Fall 2024.

Recommendation 1c

The Jury recommends a licensed professional exterminator be hired to assess whether there is active termite infestation and, as necessary, tent both structures. Additionally, the exterminator must perform all required sectional work to repair or replace all the termite-damaged areas. Repairs shall be completed by the end of the third quarter of calendar year 2024 or sooner.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule

We have monthly exterminator treatments to the exterior of the Coroner's Facility to manage and prevent pest infestations proactively. In addition to these regular treatments, we have requested a comprehensive termite inspection through Santa Barbara County General Services (GS), which was completed in July 2024. As of this writing a report, by the licensed professional exterminator has not been received. Should the inspection reveal any active termite infestation, we will collaborate with General Services to develop a plan of action to treat the termites and correct any structural damage. Furthermore, wood with termite damage has already been removed and replaced.

Recommendation 1d

The Jury recommends the installation of a state-of-the-art ventilation system in the front autopsy building. This shall be completed by the end of calendar year 2025.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken

Following the recommendations of a 2013 Grand Jury report titled "*Sheriff-Coroner's Bureau: The Manner of Death-A Final Diagnosis*," an updated, specially designed and engineered ventilation system was installed at the Coroner's Bureau in 2014. This system effectively addressed the issues identified in the 2013 report, including eliminating lingering noxious odors and controlling and preventing potential infectious

agents, thereby protecting the health of staff and the public. The system continues functioning as designed and intended, ensuring a safe and clean environment in the autopsy facility.

Recommendation 1e

The Jury recommends the entire Coroner’s facility shall be demolished and rebuilt. The Sheriff’s Office shall request, and the Board of Supervisors shall allocate, funding to implement a design and a timeline to replace this antiquated facility with one that ensures the safety of its employees and visitors by the end of calendar year 2024.

Sheriff’s Office Response:

Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule

This recommendation will be implemented. The Sheriff’s Office concurs that the Coroner's facility needs to be completely replaced. The County has begun that process by including a new coroner's facility in the over-arching Calle Real Campus Master Plan. Additionally, the old Coroner's facility will be demolished and replaced with a new 6,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art facility, which is 5,000 sq. ft. larger than the current facility. This project is expected to begin and conclude before 2039. The Sheriff’s Office believes that due to the age and design of the Coroner’s facility it should be made a priority and replaced much sooner than that.

FINDING 2

There have been no independent safety or health inspections or audits conducted at the Coroner’s facility.

Sheriff’s Office Response:

Disagree with explanation

We disagree with this finding. The County has developed a plan to replace the Coroner's facility and ensured timely repairs to address any safety or health issues for our employees and the public. Ongoing efforts have been made to address immediate concerns and plan for a new, state-of-the-art facility to ensure long-term safety and health standards.

Recommendation 2a

An inspection of the Coroner’s facility by OSHA or Cal-OSHA, whoever is available first, shall be requested immediately.

Sheriff’s Office Response:

Disagree with explanation

We disagree with this recommendation. The County has already taken significant steps to address and rectify safety and health concerns within the Coroner's Facility. These steps include developing a comprehensive plan to replace the facility, making timely repairs, and implementing improvements that address any immediate safety or health issues. Given these proactive measures, we believe an additional inspection by OSHA or Cal-OSHA is unnecessary at this time.

Additionally, Cal OSHA was consulted with during the creation of our comprehensive Coroner’s Unit Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP) in 2013 and 2014.

Recommendation 2b

In the event that neither OSHA nor Cal-OSHA are available within 60 days, the SB County Public Health Department shall contract with an independent, accredited entity to conduct an inspection.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Disagree

We disagree with this recommendation. The County has already initiated and completed several critical improvements to address safety and health concerns at the Coroner's Facility. These include installing a new roof, performing structural improvements, and initiating mold abatement procedures. Additionally, a plan is in place to replace the facility as part of the Calle Real Campus Master Plan, which will ensure the long-term safety and health of employees and visitors. Given these substantive and ongoing efforts, we believe that contracting an independent, accredited entity for further inspection is not fiscally prudent or necessary at this time.

FINDING 3

It will be beneficial to conduct parallel testing to confirm that the new rapid toxicology equipment on order is calibrated accurately and produces accurate results.

Sheriff's Office Response:

Disagree partially with an explanation

Prior to purchasing the Randox Rapid Toxicology instrument, we conducted thorough reviews of the product and its reliability, including consultations with other Sheriff-Coroner facilities in California that have utilized Randox for more than a year. In addition, we continue to verify results with a traditional toxicology laboratory for all homicides, jail deaths, and deaths involving law enforcement officers. Other cases are reviewed on a case-by-case basis to determine if they should be sent to a lab for further verification.

Recommendation 3

The Coroner Bureau shall conduct parallel toxicology testing for a minimum of 6 months based on the success of the model used by the Riverside County Coroner's office.

Sheriff's Office Response:

It will not be implemented with an explanation of why

The Randox Rapid Toxicology instrument was selected after a comprehensive evaluation process, which included detailed reviews of the product's performance and reliability. We consulted with other Sheriff-Coroner facilities in California that have been successfully using Randox for over a year. This extensive review has confirmed the instrument's effectiveness and reliability.

We believe a 6-month parallel testing period would be excessively costly and not necessary. Our comprehensive review process has demonstrated the product's reliability and effectiveness, and we have not experienced any issues with the technology to date. The ongoing use of a traditional toxicology laboratory for critical cases further ensures the accuracy and reliability of our toxicology results.

Additionally, conducting a 6-month parallel testing period would not be fiscally responsible. The resources required for such an extensive testing period would place an undue financial burden on our operations without providing significant additional value. Given the rigorous evaluation and ongoing verification processes already in place, we are confident in the accuracy and reliability of the Randox Rapid Toxicology instrument.