

# **Riverside County Sheriff's Department - Coroner's Bureau**

## **Background**

In December 1995, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors elected to incorporate the office of the Riverside County Coroner/Public Administrator under the jurisdiction of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department (as authorized by Government Code Section 24300). This consolidation was approved by the voters in the primary election of June 2, 1998, and the Sheriff-Coroner took office on January 4, 1999. The Coroner's Bureau handles all deaths and autopsies in the county. They are handling between 6,500 and 6,800 cases annually.

The county morgue is still housed in the old Simons building, a former mortuary built in 1925, and remodeled in 1982 to house the Coroner. This facility was intended to be temporary. A new morgue is under construction in Perris, and should be in operation by May of 2000. At that time, the morgue facility in the old Simons building will be vacated by the Coroner's Bureau.

The former contracts with mid-county mortuaries have been eliminated, therefore, all cases are transported directly to Riverside. East county is served by a private mortuary in Blythe that transports bodies to mid-county, where coroner deputies convey them to Riverside.

A mid-county morgue will be built in Indio. It is estimated that construction will be completed by December 2000.

There is a major effort to computerize all Coroner files for better accountability and tracking of Coroner services.

The Sheriff-Coroner has entered into a one-year contract with an outside private toxicological firm to evaluate the cost effectiveness of their services.

In July 1999, the Board of Supervisors approved a \$942,000 increase in the Sheriff-Coroner's budget that will allow the hiring of eleven additional deputies and technicians, and increasing an overall training program.

## **Findings**

1. Additional training and support are needed for eastern and mid-county personnel.
2. East county currently does not have a deputy coroner to properly investigate questionable deaths.

3.The Sheriff's Department currently does not have an internal toxicological laboratory, and must contract this work outside the county. Further, all county agencies requiring toxicological or phlebotomy services use this outside service.

4.The transportation of bodies from the east and mid-counties to Riverside are both time consuming and extremely costly.

5.Sheriff-Coroner volunteers are used for administrative work and are not trained for "field assistance" in responding to deaths.

6.The number of autopsies performed have dropped from 1,200 to about 1,000 (annually) due to budget constraints.

## **Recommendations**

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors and the Riverside County Sheriff:

1.Provide increased training and proper supervision over the eastern to mid-county deputy coroners to ensure they respond to all appropriate calls regarding a death in their jurisdiction, and to ensure proper chain-of-evidence handling.

2.Place a deputy coroner in Blythe to investigate questionable deaths and to supervise body and evidence transfers back to Riverside.

3.In view of the anticipated doubling of the county's population over the next two decades, the board must plan for the establishment of a county-owned toxicological laboratory at this time. Require all county agencies to use this county laboratory.

4.Expedite the additional morgue in Indio to handle the eastern to mid-county Sheriff-Coroner demands.

5.Encourage further volunteer involvement. Provide in-depth additional "field" training programs for volunteers in the event of a major catastrophe.

6.Provide additional funding to the Coroner's Bureau to adequately assure that all necessary autopsies are completed.