

Riverside County Coroner

Background

Riverside County is divided into three different service areas for the coroner. The western county is serviced by the existing morgue, housed in the old Simons building which was formerly a mortuary. Originally built in 1926, the building is now a historical landmark. It was remodeled in 1982 to house the coroner. The present site is antiquated and unsafe. According to the coroner, this site was intended to be temporary.

The mid-county, extending from Whitewater to Desert Center, does not have a morgue but is serviced by four contractual mortuaries. These mortuaries agree to pick up and store bodies and remains for the coroner and provide a suitable room where autopsies can be performed. In addition, the coroner maintains a staff of five deputy coroners and one auxiliary staff member in the mid-county.

The Palo Verde Valley, from Desert Center to the eastern county line at the state border, is serviced by the local mortuary in Blythe. The two owners of the mortuary are employed as deputy coroners. Otherwise, the arrangement is the same as for the mid-county.

The problems at the coroner's morgue facility have been addressed in several reports by the grand jury dating back to 1990-91. In that report the grand jury recommended, and the board of supervisors concurred, that a new site be built. The county has delayed in resolving the acknowledged problems of the coroner and improving working conditions for the employees. In 1997, the board of supervisors approved the location of a site to build a new facility and on March 17, 1998, they gave approval to build a new morgue.

Findings

1. Space is limited and the facilities are inadequate to house the increased caseload the coroner is handling. The coroner's morgue in Riverside has numerous Cal-OSHA (California Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and fire department violations dating back to 1992, which cannot be corrected without an expense comparable to building a new facility.
2. The refrigerator's capacity is inadequate to accommodate all of the bodies and remains received. The hall is used for storage when the refrigerator is full. Decomposition takes place rapidly on those bodies not in the refrigerator.
3. Odors from the morgue are not vented properly because the exhaust system is inadequate causing members of the staff to become ill.
4. Embalming has not been done at the morgue in Riverside since August of 1994 because of health concerns caused by inadequate ventilation of fumes of formalin and other chemicals. Revenues are lost because this service must now be done at local mortuaries.

5. The facility has outdated equipment. The plumbing and electrical wiring are inadequate. This causes health and safety concerns for the employees. Some examples are:
 - a. Pathologists stand in water while using electrical equipment because the autopsy room does not have a floor drain.
 - b. . The sinks in the autopsy room drain directly to the floor.
 - c. Two of the three hazardous waste receptacles are broken.
 - d. There are no ground fault circuit interrupters at sinks or on the autopsy tables as required by building codes.
6. A rodent infestation problem persists which creates health concerns mentioned in prior health inspections.
7. Open cracks in the walls and ceiling expose employees and the public to asbestos.
8. The morgue does not have emergency decontamination showers.
9. On January 5, 1999, the sheriff will officially assume the duties of the Riverside County Coroner/Public Administrator. There is an appearance of a conflict of interest with some cases, i.e., officer involved shootings and in-custody deaths after the sheriff assumes the duties of the coroner.
10. The mortuaries in the mid-county contract with the coroner's office for coroner services in that area without compensation by the county.
11. The consensus among the contracting mortuary owners in the mid-county is that the coroner is out of touch with their needs. He has not met with them since the original contract was drawn up.
12. The owners of the mortuary in Blythe receive a nominal combined salary for their service as deputy coroners.
13. The coroner is mandated by law to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner and cause of all violent, sudden or unusual deaths within the county. This includes all homicides, suicides, accidental and natural deaths where a physician has not been in attendance within twenty days prior to a death.
14. The coroner uses three pathologists, all of whom work under contract. Two work in the western county and one in the eastern and mid-county.
15. The existing contract with pathologists does not require a specific time limit to perform autopsies.
16. The pathologist in the eastern and mid-county generally works three days per week, often arriving in the afternoon. The mortuary owners must pay overtime to employees who have to stay at their facility until all autopsies have been completed.
17. The security of the chain of evidence is compromised in criminal cases in the eastern and mid-county because:
 - a. Coroner's deputies do not respond on all calls.
 - b. Mortuary representatives are often asked to draw and store blood samples in unlocked refrigerators. These samples often have value as evidence.
 - c. Mortuary representatives are sometimes asked to do preliminary investigative work in coroner cases.
 - d. The belongings of the deceased are gathered by mortuary personnel and stored at the mortuary facilities.

Recommendations

Board of Supervisors:

1. Expedite the construction of the new morgue in the western county for completion within the next year.
2. Build an adequate freestanding morgue conveniently located to serve the eastern and mid-county areas.
3. Allow the coroner to view and acquire equipment at the closed Riverside General Hospital for use at the coroner's facilities.
4. Direct that audits be conducted on coroner's evidence to ensure the security of the evidence.
5. Direct that periodic checks be made on a random basis to verify that only authorized personnel handle and provide security of evidence.

Coroner:

1. Immediately reevaluate the contracts with the mortuary owners in the mid-county.
2. Direct that all autopsies be performed in keeping with optimal preservation of evidence.
3. Include two grand jury representatives to participate as observers at coroner investigation/hearings as an oversight to avoid an appearance of a conflict of interest.
4. Hire a second part time pathologist to be based in the eastern and mid-county.
5. The existing coroner and his staff to work with the sheriff to facilitate the transition of responsibilities of the coroner to the sheriff.
6. Adequately train and deputize one representative from each contracting mortuary or hire additional deputies to service the area.