

HUMBOLDT COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE - CORONER

Serving the Community, Involving the Community

Released July 11th, 2025

SUMMARY

Death is inevitable. When it occurs, residents of Humboldt County depend upon the empathetic, skilled, and dedicated staff of the Humboldt County Sheriff's Coroner's Office to provide essential services during their most difficult moments. These professionals approach their work with cultural sensitivity and unwavering professionalism, despite operating within an antiquated, overcrowded, and inadequate facility.

The Coroner's Office provides invaluable educational opportunities for students pursuing medical careers, who serve as volunteers while gaining practical knowledge and developing critical skills. These volunteers provide essential assistance that significantly benefits both the students and the office's operations.

Through its participation in the "Every 15 Minutes" program—named for the tragic frequency at which drunk driving claims lives—the Coroner's Office contributes to community education. The office collaborates in annual presentations at local high schools, delivering powerful messages about the devastating consequences of impaired driving.

Staff have demonstrated commendable dedication in implementing improvements, including those recommended by previous Humboldt County Civil Grand Juries. Two notable achievements are the completion of a comprehensive Policy and Procedures Manual, and the ongoing digitization of evidence room records—a nine-month cataloging and organizational effort.

Critical deficiencies persist, however. Counter surfaces and cabinets remain non-compliant with National Association of Medical Examiners standards. They are constructed of permeable materials that pose health and safety risks. The evidence room requires an advanced locking system capable of identifying and tracking individual access.

BACKGROUND

The Humboldt County Coroner's Office operates under the authority of the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office, deriving its legal mandate from California Penal Code Section 830.35. Located within the Clark Complex in Eureka at 3012 I Street, the office occupies a structure with a long history. Constructed in 1906 as the General Hospital, the Clark Complex houses the Coroner's

Office in an addition built in the 1970s. The entire complex suffers from structural deterioration and requires significant maintenance attention.

METHODOLOGY

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury conducted a site visit of the Coroner's Office. We inspected the reception area, offices, autopsy room, cooler, loading area, room, and auxiliary spaces.

Our investigation included a thorough review of applicable California Government Code provisions and standards established by the National Association of Medical Examiners. Additional research, document analysis, and follow-up interviews were conducted to verify the facility's compliance with state mandates.

DISCUSSION

Staffing

Office staff consists of a Coroner position (currently vacant), a Coroner Sergeant Supervisor, four Deputy Coroner positions (one vacant), an Assistant Public Administrator, and one office assistant. All positions are full-time; the office also depends heavily on the work of part-time volunteers. The recent reclassification of the Coroner position from a sworn Deputy Coroner role to a civilian position has expanded the potential candidate pool while improving budget efficiency.

Staff members are not required to possess formal medical training or biological science backgrounds. However, extensive professional development opportunities are available, including specialized training in infant death investigations, drowning death investigations, and specialty death investigations. The annual Coroner's Symposium provides additional educational opportunities, with two staff members attending annually.

Following particularly challenging cases, staff participate in structured debriefing sessions. Mental health support is readily available through the "Family Restoration" services program, which provides up to twelve therapy sessions annually for Coroner's Office personnel. This is available both in-person and via telephone consultation.

Volunteer Program Excellence

The Coroner's office volunteer program represents a cornerstone of operational success. The program began in 2009. Volunteers play an integral role in the autopsy process by assisting the forensic pathologist. The program provides support to the county at no cost and creates an invaluable opportunity for the volunteers to learn and gain medical experience. Volunteers in the Autopsy Assistant Program are recruited from the College of the Redwoods and Cal Poly Humboldt students enrolled in nursing, pre-medical, and paramedic programs, typically through

faculty recommendation. This program provides mutual benefit: students gain invaluable practical experience while providing essential operational support.

Volunteers begin with observation-only assignments before progressing to more substantive assistance roles. All training occurs through hands-on experience under professional supervision. These volunteers collectively provided 4,722 volunteer hours in 2024. This is equivalent to nearly 2.5 full-time positions, generating savings for the County in excess of \$78,000 in wages alone (calculated at minimum wage rates). The actual cost savings are substantially higher because the County does not have to provide benefits for the volunteers or incur other related employment costs.

The Autopsy Assistant Program operates under the coordination of one distinguished long-term volunteer who has contributed over 14,000 hours of service to the Coroner's Office. This exceptional dedication earned recognition through the President's Volunteer Lifetime Achievement Award, presented by President Biden.

Additional volunteers include clergy members and office assistants. Clergy volunteers provide crucial spiritual support, comfort, and guidance to grieving families as they interact with the Coroner's Office during their most vulnerable moments.

Budget

The Coroner's office budget accounts for just under 3% of the budget for the Sheriff's Office. Humboldt County continues to face large budget deficits which results in constraints to many county services, including the Coroner's office. One positive recent development is the reclassification of the Coroner position from a sworn Deputy Coroner role to a civilian position, which will result in some savings in the budget for the Sheriff's Office. However, budget constraints limit the ability to make improvements (adding space, staff, and replacing equipment) necessary for the efficiency and integrity of the functions of the Coroner's Office.

Responsibilities and Authority

The Coroner exercises statutory duty and authority to investigate all suspicious deaths, including violent or sudden deaths, deaths reasonably suspected to result from criminal acts, and deaths occurring when the decedent was not under physician care for twenty days or more.

The Coroner determines the circumstances, manner, and cause of death, performing autopsies when necessary. Additional responsibilities include receiving, retaining, and distributing personal property in the decedent's possession at the time of death, and storing remains until release. This authority derives from California Government Code Section 27491 and related subsections.

During 2024, the Coroner's Office conducted 359 death investigations, with 150 requiring autopsy examination.

Legal Compliance Requirements

California law mandates maintenance of the Coroner's Register¹ to document decedents' names, circumstances and causes of death, witness information, property inventories, disposition of property and remains, and notification records.

Additional legal requirements are specified in Government Code Sections 27462, 27463, 27465, and 27491.25.

Administrative Operations

The Humboldt County Coroner's Register is maintained in both physical and digital formats, with the digital version enabling efficient report generation. Individual case files are created for each investigation. Our review of randomly selected case files and the 2024 Coroner's Register confirmed compliance with California Government Code Section 27463 requirements.

Dedicated staff have produced a comprehensive 86-page Humboldt County Coroner's Office Policy & Procedures Manual, addressing a significant operational gap. This manual was developed in direct response to previous Grand Jury recommendations and provides standardized operational procedures, policy guidance, and reference materials for office operations.

The office has implemented a secure fingerprint processing system that interfaces with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Department of Justice databases. While fingerprint data is automatically purged from the Coroner's system after fourteen days, federal agencies maintain permanent records. The Department of Justice utilizes this data to confirm decedent identification for the Coroner.

The Coroner's Office is implementing the case management system used by the Sheriff's Office for property inventory and tracking. This system will provide comprehensive property tracking. Currently, decedents' personal property is logged at just two points in time (upon receipt and upon release). There is no way to track when or by whom the property is accessed while it is in the Coroner's Office. These accountability gaps will be eliminated with the transition to the new system.

Each case file documents property disposition as required by California Government Code Section 27465. Paper files are maintained indefinitely, with some records dating back to the 1950s.

The Coroner's Office lacks an independent mass casualty/disaster response plan, relying instead on the Office of Emergency Services' comprehensive plan.

The County will pay for cremation services if the decedent and the next of kin are indigent, or if the body was unclaimed.

Community Outreach

¹ Government Code Section 27463 <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/government-code/gov-sect-27463.html>

The Coroner's Office participates actively in the "Every 15 Minutes" program, a collaborative initiative involving the California Highway Patrol, local law enforcement, emergency medical responders, and educational institutions. Presented at local high schools on a rotating annual basis, the comprehensive program features realistic DUI scenarios with the goal of deterring students from driving while impaired. Portions of these presentations are filmed at the Coroner's Office to enhance their impact and authenticity.

Facility Assessment

The facility comprises a minimal reception area with a service counter, shared offices that double as conference spaces, a refrigerated storage unit for remains, and an autopsy room. There are also storage areas for personal property, unclaimed cremated remains, forensic evidence, and supplies. A hallway serves dual purposes as equipment storage and as a viewing area for families identifying deceased loved ones. The rear entrance to the Office facilitates body transfers from Coroner vehicles; this entryway includes a floor scale.

The facility's age, size limitations, and poor condition create significant operational challenges. There is no appropriate private space for family identification of remains. Bodies are transported on gurneys into the hallway adjacent to the cooler, with portable partitions providing minimal privacy. The Coroner's Office pamphlet appropriately states: "The Coroner's Office is not designed to accommodate viewing." A small alcove along one hallway accommodates the Chaplain's desk, but no additional seating. No dedicated space exists for staff meetings with families that does not simultaneously serve as a workspace. Security consists solely of an alarm system, with no surveillance cameras. The office has requested key fob systems for front and rear doors and the evidence room.

The Coroner's Office shares the building with Sempervirens Psychiatric Health Facility, which is located immediately adjacent to the Coroner's Office. The Coroner's Office has expanded slightly into the former Sempervirens space, adding one office and the chaplain's alcove. In December of 2024, the County Department of Health and Human Services applied for and received a \$45 million state grant to construct a new downtown Eureka facility for Sempervirens. Upon Sempervirens' relocation, the Coroner's Office could potentially expand into the vacated space.

Current conditions remain unchanged from the previous year. The 2023-2024 Grand Jury noted: "The 2015-2016 Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury found that 'the physical conditions of the Coroner-Public Administrator Office are deplorable and represent substandard working conditions for dedicated professionals.' These conditions do not appear to have changed since 2016."

Autopsy Room Conditions

The autopsy room occupies a former hospital operating room. Counter surfaces and cabinets are made of permeable materials that are deteriorating and require replacement with units made of stainless steel or other non-permeable materials. Decedents' clothing and medical waste are disposed of in accordance with applicable regulations.

The autopsy room fails to comply with National Association of Medical Examiners Inspection and Accreditation Checklist requirement C3n, which mandates that "surfaces in the autopsy room are nonporous and easily cleaned."²

Refrigeration Facilities

The cooler accommodates a maximum of sixteen bodies, becoming extremely cramped at full capacity. The Coroner maintains formal agreements with local mortuaries for supplementary space should additional refrigerated storage be required.

The cooler is locked at night. While a thermostat is visible in a high-traffic area, no monitoring system exists to alert staff to equipment failures. Inadequate ventilation in the cooler results in persistent odor issues.

Emergency backup power is provided by an on-site generator.

Evidence and Property Storage

Personal property, cremated remains, evidence, and unidentified bones are stored in an undersized room lacking adequate cabinets and storage racks. Room access is controlled by a single code shared among all staff members. Once inside, an individual has access to everything in the room. There is no way to track exactly what property is accessed, and there is no record identifying who even entered the room. This creates significant risks for tampering, contamination, or loss of records, forensic evidence, cremated remains, and personal property.

Previous Grand Juries have identified exposed electrical wiring hazards. The wiring is now sheathed with insulated materials, and is partially concealed by freestanding cabinets.

All unidentified bones are retained indefinitely, stored in file boxes stacked nearly to ceiling height. A Sheriff's Office property technician has spent nine months cataloging and organizing the evidence room to facilitate digital database entry. Previous Grand Juries have recommended information digitization, and the office is actively working toward this goal.

Decedents' Personal Property Management

Personal property is inventoried, labeled, and stored systematically. Firearms found in decedents' possession are transferred to the Sheriff's Office for secure storage. Staff may dispose of personal possessions accompanying unclaimed bodies.

Vehicle Fleet

² NAME Inspection and Accreditation checklist

<https://name.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/NAME%20Accreditation%20Checklist%202024%20-%202029.pdf>

Three vehicles comprise the fleet, with two designated for remains transport. Neither vehicle includes refrigerated compartments, which is acceptable because the drive back to the office is not long enough to compromise evidence integrity (the longest one-way drive back to the Eureka office takes at most two-and-a-half hours). All vehicles receive regular service and maintenance through the County Motor Pool.

Safety Protocols

Safety equipment includes an eyewash station and an emergency shower. Complete personal protective equipment is available on-site, including Tyvek suits, N95 masks, gloves, face shields, and gowns. While a portable X-ray machine and protective shield are available, a dedicated room with lead-lined walls would provide superior radiation containment.

Formaldehyde storage complies with California Division of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA) requirements. Safety Data Sheets for formaldehyde and other chemicals are readily accessible in a binder located outside the autopsy room, ensuring quick access to safety protocols and regulatory compliance.

Pathology Services

External assessment by a pathologist can sometimes determine the manner and cause of death without performing an autopsy. The Coroner's Office utilizes a local Internal Medical Specialist for most external assessments and autopsies when necessary. For suspected homicides, suspicious deaths, or cases requiring specialized expertise, the office contracts with Oregon State Police pathology services. The local physician typically provides services within one to two days, while it may take up to a week before the Oregon pathologist is able to travel to Eureka. In the rare cases that pathologist services are unavailable, DNA testing of blood samples is an alternative identification method. These arrangements adequately meet current legal and medical professional requirements.

Organ Donation

Staff routinely check decedent identification documents and driver's licenses for organ donor designations. The Office now has formal protocols for handling organ donations in its new Policies and Procedures Manual. A Memorandum of Understanding with Donor Network West regarding organ donation is pending finalization. Donor Network West coordinates tissue and organ donations; they identify donors and any donor needs, and they arrange expedited collection from providers such as the Coroner's Office.

Unidentified Remains

When other identification methods fail, tooth grinding (preferably using molars) can provide identification. This analysis is done by the U.S. Department of Justice, but results are slow in coming due to a significant case backlog. For remains that cannot be identified, the Coroner must submit dental, fingerprint, and DNA data to the California Department of Justice within

forty-five days of receipt, as required by California Government Code Section 27521 and Health and Safety Code Section 102870.

Another tool utilized by the Coroner's Office to identify remains is the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).³ The U.S. Department of Justice created NamUs to serve as a centralized repository of identification resources for investigators working to resolve unidentified remains cases.

Unclaimed Remains Disposition

Identified but unclaimed remains are cremated and stored at the Coroner's Office. After one year, cremated remains are disposed of at sea (typically, multiple remains are disposed of in a single voyage).

Cultural and Religious Sensitivity

The Coroner's Office demonstrates a commitment to respecting the cultural and religious beliefs of decedents and their families. A recent example involved honoring a Native American family's request that all personal possessions accompanying the body remain with the decedent throughout the entire process.

Family members may not know what to expect when they come in to view a body. Staff prepare the family by first explaining what the body will look like, allowing the family to decide whether or not they actually want to view the remains. The Coroner's Office has developed a public information pamphlet stating: "Cultures are very diverse in their practices and beliefs. Please inform the Coroner's Office immediately of any special needs or concerns."

CONCLUSION

Dedicated and empathetic staff, supported by exceptional volunteers, collectively provide essential community services despite operating in an inadequate, undersized, and aging facility. Coroner's Office personnel have demonstrated commitment to implementing previous Grand Jury recommendations through significant achievements: the creation of a comprehensive Policy and Procedures Manual and the challenging task of cataloging and reorganizing the evidence room.

FINDINGS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

F1: The Coroner's Office staff and volunteers perform exemplary service and maintain investigational integrity while operating in an antiquated, undersized, and poorly maintained

³ NamUS <https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/>

facility. Providing this professional and respectful service benefits the community, deceased individuals, and their families.

F2: The Coroner's Office staff and volunteers perform exemplary service and maintain investigational integrity while operating under severe budget and resource constraints. Providing this professional and respectful service benefits the community, deceased individuals, and their families.

F3: The Coroner's Office relies substantially on volunteers, who collectively contributed 4,722 volunteer hours in 2024. This generated significant cost savings for the County while providing valuable training and experience to local medical students.

F4: Dedicated staff have successfully produced a comprehensive 86-page Humboldt County Coroner's Office Policy & Procedures Manual. This manual will standardize practices, inform employees of policies, and serve as an operational reference guide.

F5: The Humboldt County Coroner's Register is maintained in both physical and digital formats. This enables efficient report generation from the digital version.

F6: Safety Data Sheets for formaldehyde and other chemicals are readily available to the Coroners' Office staff. This provides immediate access to safety protocols and ensures compliance with California Division of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA) requirements.

F7: A Sheriff's Office property technician has dedicated nine months to cataloging and organizing the evidence room to facilitate record digitization. The digital database will enhance record retrieval, sharing, and storage efficiency and reliability. **(R1)**

F8: The existing counter surfaces and cabinets in the Coroner's Office autopsy room are permeable, deteriorating, and fail to comply with National Association of Medical Examiners standards. This creates safety risks and contamination hazards. **(R2)**

F9: The Coroner's Office evidence/storage room access is controlled by a single code shared among all staff. The inability to identify specific room access creates risks of tampering, contamination, or loss of records, forensic evidence, cremated remains, and decedents' personal property. **(R3)**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1: The Humboldt County Sheriff complete cataloging and organization of the evidence/storage room and enter all property information into a digital record system by April 1, 2026. **(F7)**

R2: The Humboldt County Sheriff replace counter surfaces and cabinets with stainless steel or other non-permeable surfacing materials by January 1, 2026. For funding recommendations, see the wording below recommendation #3. **(F8)**

R3: The Humboldt County Sheriff installs a locking system on the evidence/storage room door by October 15, 2025, that differentiates between users, records date and time of entry/exit, and identifies each individual accessing the room. For funding recommendations, see the wording below recommendation #3. **(F9)**

Funding Recommendation:

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff coordinate with the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors to fund expenses specified in Recommendations **R2 and R3** through appropriations in the upcoming fiscal year. Should funding prove insufficient, the Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff and Board of Supervisors pursue additional funding from appropriate sources, including state or federal agencies. The Bureau of Justice Assistance offers grants through its Medical Examiner/Coroner System Program, as do the National Association of Medical Examiners and the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program.

RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- The respondent agrees with the finding; or
- The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding; in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action; or
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation; or
- The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency where applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report; or

- The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

REQUIRED RESPONSE – WITHIN 60 DAYS

The Humboldt County Sheriff
(All findings, all recommendations)

REQUIRED RESPONSE – WITHIN 90 DAYS

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors
(All findings, all recommendations)

Invited Responses

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury also invites the following entities or individuals to respond.

The Humboldt County Department of Public Works
(F1, F8, F9) and (R2, R3)

Responses are to be sent to:

The Honorable Judge Kelly L. Neel
Humboldt County Superior Court
825 5th Street, Eureka, CA 95501

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury
PO Box 657, Eureka, CA 95502 A

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.