



County of Fresno

COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

PAUL NERLAND

COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

August 6, 2026

The Honorable Judge Jeffrey Hamilton, Jr.
Fresno County Superior Court
1100 Van Ness Avenue
Fresno, CA 93724-0002

RE: Fresno County Response to 2025-2026 Grand Jury Report No. 1, "Silent Guardians: The Unsung Work of the Fresno County Coroner's Office"

Dear Honorable Judge Hamilton:

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933.05, the Fresno County Administrative Officer and Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner submits the following responses to Findings F2 through F8 and Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R5 and R6 contained in Fresno County Civil Grand Jury Report No. 1, "Silent Guardians: The Unsung Work of the Fresno County Coroner's Office." The County appreciates the work of the Civil Grand Jury and the opportunity to review the operations, staffing, and facility needs of the Coroner's Office. The Sheriff's Office remains committed to providing professional, compassionate, and effective medicolegal death investigation services to the residents of Fresno County while continually evaluating opportunities to improve operations, staffing, supervision, employee wellness, and public service.

FINDINGS

F2. The Fresno County Coroner's Office employs only one half-time forensic pathologist, which does not provide adequate in-house forensic pathology coverage.

The County partially disagrees with this finding and would note that the Grand Jury report references the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME); however the facility is not NAME accredited and therefore, the NAME standards are best practices rather than mandatory requirements. Further, the County maintains service through a hybrid staffing model, which the Grand Jury acknowledges outsourcing is common practice. The Sheriff-Coroner agrees that the Fresno County Coroner's Office currently employs one half-time forensic pathologist and that additional full-time forensic pathology resources would be beneficial to the organization.

However, the Sheriff-Coroner disagrees with the conclusion that Fresno County does not have adequate forensic pathology coverage. Fresno County currently provides forensic pathology services through hybrid staffing model, which is a combination of employed and contracted board-certified forensic pathologists. This staffing model ensures continuity of service and allows the Coroner's Office to continue fulfilling its statutory responsibilities despite significant workforce shortages affecting the profession nationwide.

In 2022, Fresno County experienced the unexpected loss of its Chief Forensic Pathologist. As a result, a substantial number of pending pathology cases required completion and review. The currently employed half-time forensic pathologist is a retired forensic pathologist who has been instrumental in assisting the County with completion of these legacy cases and improving overall case management.

Since 2022, Fresno County has actively recruited for a full-time Chief Forensic Pathologist position. During that time, the County has increased compensation and benefits on multiple occasions, resulting in substantial salary enhancements totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past four years. Despite these efforts, Fresno County continues to face the same recruitment challenges affecting coroner and medical examiner agencies throughout California and the nation.

The Sheriff's Office remains committed to ongoing recruitment efforts for a full-time Chief Forensic Pathologist while continuing to utilize qualified contracted forensic pathologists to ensure uninterrupted service delivery.

F3. There are 1,164 open cases creating a three-year backlog with no plan to alleviate the backlog.

The County partially disagrees with this finding. The Sheriff-Coroner agrees that the number of unclosed Coroner case files identified during the review was unacceptable and did not meet the operational expectations of the Sheriff's Office or the level of service expected by the community.

However, the Sheriff-Coroner disagrees with the portion of the finding stating there was no plan to alleviate the backlog. Beginning in March 2026, the Coroner's Office implemented a backlog reduction strategy utilizing expanded overtime opportunities, enhanced management oversight, and temporary staffing resources dedicated to case completion activities.

The unclosed case files referenced in the finding did not represent cases awaiting cause-of-death determinations, nor did they delay the release of decedents to their families or impact criminal prosecutions. Rather, these files primarily consisted of investigations requiring completion of administrative documentation, collection of records, or final case closure procedures.

As a result of these efforts, more than 800 previously unclosed case files have been completed, reducing the backlog to a more manageable number.

The Sheriff's Office remains committed to eliminating the remaining backlog and implementing organizational improvements designed to prevent a recurrence.

- F4. Due to the absence of a full-time Forensic Pathologist, the Coroner's Office relies heavily on contracted Forensic Pathologists to perform routine and complex autopsies, provide case consultations, and deliver court testimony.**

The County agrees with this finding; however, the County has taken appropriate steps to maintain forensic pathology services by continuously recruiting for a full-time Chief Forensic Pathologist, enhancing the position's compensation and benefits package, and contracting with board-certified professionals. These contracts allow the Coroner's Office to fulfill its statutory responsibilities without interruption amid a nationwide shortage of qualified forensic pathologists. The use of contracted pathologists is an established staffing approach among coroner and medical examiner agencies throughout California and the nation.

- F5. Over the past three years, the County Purchasing Department increased spending on contracted Forensic Pathologists, even though these funds could have supported multiple full-time Forensic Pathologist positions under industry standards.**

The County partially disagrees with this finding. While expenditures for contracted forensic pathology services have increased, the County has continued to budget for full-time Forensic Pathologist positions. Despite ongoing recruitment efforts, those positions have remained difficult to fill due to a significant statewide and nationwide shortage of qualified, board-certified forensic pathologists. Accordingly, contract expenditures reflect the need to maintain uninterrupted services while funded positions remain vacant, rather than a policy decision to rely on contracted services in lieu of County employees.

- F6. The current Master Service Agreement expires January 8, 2027, after which continued reliance on contracted services will require renewal, rebidding, or the development of an alternative staffing model.**

The County partially disagrees with this finding. While the base term of the Master Service Agreement expires on January 8, 2027, the finding does not acknowledge that the Agreement includes two optional one-year extensions that may extend the term through January 8, 2029. Subject to satisfactory contractor performance, the County intends to exercise the available extension options. As a result, continued contracted forensic pathology services would not necessarily require immediate renewal, rebidding or development of an alternative staffing model following the expiration of the base term.

- F7. The hybrid staffing model creates operational inefficiencies such as scheduling challenges, case continuity concerns, delayed report completion, and limited institutional knowledge retention.**

The County partially disagrees with this finding. The Sheriff's Office agrees that staffing shortages have contributed to scheduling challenges, increased workloads, and delays in administrative case completion. However, the Sheriff's Office disagrees with the conclusion that the hybrid forensic pathology staffing model itself is the primary cause of these challenges.

The use of contracted forensic pathologists is a common and widely accepted practice throughout California and the United States due to the ongoing nationwide shortage of board-certified forensic pathologists.

As part of the FY 2026-27 budget process, the Sheriff's Office has proposed the addition of two Deputy Coroner positions and one Supervising Deputy Coroner position. If approved, these positions will reduce caseloads, improve supervision, expand operational coverage, enhance retention, and strengthen institutional knowledge.

The additional supervisory position will improve employee development, performance monitoring, accountability, and case management oversight while allowing greater supervisory focus on Deputy Coroner operations.

F8. The current facility lacks essential operational and public spaces necessary for effective and compassionate service delivery.

The County agrees with this finding. The Sheriff's Office acknowledges that the current Coroner facility does not provide all of the operational, employee wellness, and public-facing spaces necessary to fully support the important work performed by Coroner personnel.

Coroner personnel routinely work in an environment that requires professionalism, compassion, and resilience while assisting families experiencing grief and loss. The Sheriff's Office recognizes that staff deserve adequate workspace, appropriate break areas, and private locations to perform sensitive duties and meet with members of the public.

The Sheriff's Office appreciates the dedication of Coroner personnel who continue to provide exceptional service despite these facility limitations and supports efforts to improve the working environment for employees and the services provided to the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors should adopt a budget for the Coroner's Office to recruit and retain at least one full-time, board-certified Forensic Pathologist prior to expiration of Master Service Agreement No. 24-014 to be completed by September 30, 2026. (F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8)

This recommendation will be implemented by October 2, 2026. The FY 2025-26 Adopted Budget includes one Chief Forensic Pathologist position and one Forensic Pathologist position, both of which are also included in the FY 2026-27 Recommended Budget. Pursuant to the California County Budget Act, the FY 2026-27 County Budget will be adopted no later than October 2, 2026.

R2. The Fresno County Sheriff's Office and the Coroner's Office should develop and implement an immediate plan to reduce the existing backlog of 1,164 open cases to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F3)

This recommendation has been implemented. Prior to the issuance of this report, the Fresno County Sheriff's Office and Coroner's Office developed and implemented a backlog reduction plan.

The implemented strategy has resulted in the closure of more than 800 previously unclosed case files and has substantially reduced the backlog. Supervisory staff continue to monitor closure rates and case progress through recurring management reports.

The Sheriff's Office anticipates completion of the remaining backlog by December 31, 2026.

- R3. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors should direct the Chief Administrative Office to conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis comparing annual expenditures on contracted forensic pathology services with the cost of employing full-time Forensic Pathologists to be completed by March 31, 2027. (F4, F5, F6, F7)**

This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted. The County's annual budget process already evaluates staffing needs, available resources, and service delivery alternatives, including the continued funding of full-time Forensic Pathologist positions. The County's use of contracted forensic pathology services is not intended to replace work that could otherwise be performed by available County employees. Rather, contracted services are necessary to maintain uninterrupted services amid a significant statewide and nationwide shortage of qualified, board-certified forensic pathologists.

The County Budget includes one Chief Forensic Pathologist position and one Forensic Pathologist position, and the County has continuously recruited for the full-time Chief Forensic Pathologist position since 2022. During that time, the County has enhanced the position's compensation and benefits package multiple times to improve recruitment. Despite these efforts, the position remains difficult to fill due to the limited number of qualified candidates.

Accordingly, the primary factor driving the County's reliance on contracted forensic pathology services is the limited availability of qualified forensic pathologists, not the cost of funding permanent positions. A separate cost-benefit analysis would not address the underlying workforce shortage or alter the County's operational need to utilize contracted forensic pathologists. Contracting with board-certified professionals is an established staffing approach among coroner and medical examiner agencies and enables the County to fulfill its statutory responsibilities while recruitment efforts continue.

- R5. The Fresno County Sheriff's Office and the Coroner's Office should develop a three-year forensic pathology staffing stabilization plan to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F2, F3, F4, F7)**

This recommendation will be implemented by December 31, 2026. The Sheriff's Office recognizes the importance of maintaining a stable and effective staffing model within the Coroner's Office.

The Sheriff's Office has proposed the addition of two Deputy Coroner positions and one Supervising Deputy Coroner position. If approved, these positions will improve staffing levels, reduce individual workloads, enhance supervisory oversight, expand operational coverage including night-time response capabilities, and create additional promotional opportunities for existing staff.

The Sheriff's Office will continue recruitment efforts for a full-time forensic pathologist while maintaining relationships with qualified contracted forensic pathologists. The effectiveness of these staffing enhancements and the overall staffing model will be evaluated by December 31, 2026, and additional adjustments will be considered as necessary.

R6. The Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner's Office should prioritize funding for three modular buildings in its 2026-2027 budget to include essential operational and public spaces to be completed by September 30, 2026. (F8)

This recommendation has been implemented. The Sheriff's Office agrees that additional space is needed to address operational, employee wellness, and public service needs within the Coroner's Office. Accordingly, the Sheriff's Office has identified and prioritized the modular building project and has submitted the proposal for consideration through the County budget process.

The Sheriff's Office notes, however, that capital facility projects, including the funding, approval, design, and construction of modular buildings, are outside the direct authority of the Sheriff-Coroner and are subject to review and approval through the County Administrative Office, the County's Capital Projects process, and the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

At the time of this response, the Sheriff's Office has submitted the project for consideration but funding has not yet been approved. The Sheriff's Office will continue to support and advocate for the project as it moves through the appropriate County review and approval processes.

Capital improvement projects are evaluated and prioritized through the County's capital planning and annual budget process, which considers countywide operational needs, available funding, and competing capital priorities. Any future facility improvements remain subject to review through the County Administrative Office, consideration as part of the County's Capital Improvement Program, funding availability, and approval by the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

This concludes the response from the Fresno County Administrative Office and the Sheriff-Coroner's Office. If you have any questions, please contact Amy Ryals, Principal Administrative Analyst at aryals@fresnocountyca.gov or (559) 600-1227.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Nerland". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

Paul Nerland
County Administrative Officer

Cc: John Zanoni, Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner-Public Administrator