

# Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner's Office

## Silent Guardians: The Unsung Work of the Fresno County Coroner's Office



*Main entrance of the Fresno County Coroner's Building.  
Photo source: Civil Grand Juror.*



### 2025-2026 Fresno County Civil Grand Jury

**Report # 1**

**Report Date:**

**Release Date:**

## **SUMMARY**

Members of the Fresno County Civil Grand Jury determined that the Fresno County Coroner's Office warranted a new review. Previous Civil Grand Jury reports examining the office were issued in 2001-2002, 2006-2007, and 2013-2014.

In reviewing these reports, the Civil Grand Jury noted that the 2006-2007 Civil Grand Jury recommended amending the Fresno County Charter to allow replacement of the elected Coroner with an appointed Medical Examiner-Coroner. The 2013-2014 Civil Grand Jury report further examined alternative governance models and potential changes to eligibility requirements for serving in the office. Recommendation 103 of the 2013-2014 Civil Grand Jury report stated that the Board of Supervisors (BOS) should undertake to amend the County Charter to dissolve the office of Coroner, and in its place appoint a Medical Examiner who will serve as Coroner. The BOS did not agree with the findings due to a vote of the people required to amend the County Charter and placing this item on the ballot would have a cost to the County.

Given that more than 15 years have passed since the Civil Grand Jury last conducted a review or issued a report on the Coroner's Office, jurors concluded that a new evaluation was appropriate. This determination was based on their assessment of prior findings and recommendations.

The 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury conducted a recent investigation into the Coroner's Office, including follow-up on changes implemented since the 2013-2014 report. The investigation included interviews, review of office records, and examination of current policies and procedures within the Coroner's Office.

## **GLOSSARY**

BOS – Board of Supervisors

CAO – County Administrative Office

NAME – The National Association of Medical Examiners

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Qualifications of the Coroner**

A forensic autopsy shall only be conducted by a licensed physician and surgeon. (Government Code § 27522(a).

### **Responsibilities of the Coroner**

Under Government Code § 27491(a), the Coroner is responsible for investigating deaths that fall into the following categories: violent, sudden, or unusual deaths; unattended deaths; and deaths in which the deceased was not attended by a physician within 20 days prior to death fall under the jurisdiction of the Coroner. This also includes deaths related to or following known or suspected self-inflicted or criminal acts, as well as known or suspected homicides and suicides. Additional reportable deaths include those due to accidental poisoning; drowning; fire or burns; hanging; gunshot wounds; environmental exposure; starvation; acute alcoholism; drug addiction or overdose; and strangulation. Deaths suspected to be sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) are also included.

### **Sheriff-Coroner Model in California**

On November 12, 2013 and December 3, 2013, the BOS approved the consolidation of the Coroner's Office with the Sheriff's Office effective January 1, 2015. The recommended budget includes the addition of one Sheriff's Lieutenant position to oversee the consolidation of the Coroner's Office operations with the Sheriff's Office as part of the 2014-15 Adopted Budget.

Most California county Coroners are part of or under the supervision of the county Sheriff's Office through a consolidated Sheriff-Coroner model. Forty-eight out of California's 58 counties have consolidated the offices of the Sheriff and the Coroner, meaning the Sheriff also serves as the Coroner and the Coroner functions are performed within the Sheriff's Office structure.

The remaining counties have separate Coroner or independent medical examiner systems. The counties of Inyo, Sacramento, and San Mateo maintain coroner offices, and Alameda, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Ventura use an independent medical examiner model.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Civil Grand Jury conducted interviews with Fresno County employees associated with the Sheriff-Coroner's Office. In addition to interviews, the Civil Grand Jury performed a site visit to the Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner's Office. Documentation requested and received from County and Coroner's Office employees was analyzed along with information gathered from the Sheriff's-Coroner-Public Administrator's website, Fresno County CAO website, other internet research relevant to this report, past Fresno County Civil Grand Jury reports 2006-2007 and 2013-2014, and the 2013-2014 Sonoma County Sheriff-Coroner's Office Report for reference only.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Coroner's Office Facility**

In both the 2006–2007 and 2013–2014 reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury, recommendations were made to move forward with construction of a new morgue facility. In 2009, the Fresno County Public Works and Planning – Capital Projects Division developed plans for Building 714, the proposed new Coroner's facility. The Coroner's Office is organized with distinct roles and facilities to ensure efficient

operations and comprehensive services. Below is an overview of its personnel and physical spaces.

**Personnel** include a Coroner, a Chief Pathologist, two to four Pathologists, a Deputy Coroner, a Secretary, a Business Manager, and general clerical staff.

**Facilities** include conference rooms, a consulting room, an administrative conference room, quiet rooms, staff break and locker rooms, equipment and electrical rooms, storage and server areas, a public entry with a vestibule, a covered walkway, and an employee plaza.



*Entrance to the Coroner's Office, where families are currently welcomed.  
Photo source: Civil Grand Juror.*

In 2015, the Coroner's Office took occupancy of its new facility; however, due to county budget constraints and the reallocation of originally projected funds, many elements included in the 2009 plans were not constructed. As a result, significant space and functional deficiencies remain.

For example:

- Contracted Forensic Pathologists do not have designated offices;
- Administrative staff lack private office space;

- There is no consulting room;
- There is no public entry with vestibule;
- There is no quiet room where officials can meet with bereaved families;
- There is no employee break area.

The Senior Deputy Coroner currently occupies an office space originally designed as an autopsy viewing room, and the current Forensic Pathologist works out of a converted janitorial closet.

Because the facility lacks appropriate public access and quiet rooms, the Coroner's Office does not permit members of the public to enter the building. In certain cases, the lobby, where decedents are received and processed, has been used to meet with families of the deceased. Quiet rooms, which are standard in many Coroner facilities, provide an essential service by offering a private space for families to grieve and process their emotions. They reduce exposure to the noise and activity of a working office environment, allow access to support resources and staff, enable compassionate communication of updates and information, and foster a respectful setting for discussions involving sensitive matters.

During this investigation, the Civil Grand Jury learned that the CAO approved and set aside funding to install three modular buildings to address the shortage of administrative offices, a quiet room, and other needed spaces. The Grand Jury understands this project would have been a temporary, though not ideal, solution. However, the project has not been implemented, and we understand that the allocated funds were subsequently withdrawn from the Coroner's budget.

For the 2025-2026 fiscal year the Sheriff-Coroner submitted a recommended budget to the County Administrative Officer that included buildout of modular units. However, that has not been completed and was not expected to be completed in this fiscal year.



*Vacant lot adjacent to the Fresno County Coroner's Building proposed for the future placement of three modular buildings.*

*Photo source: Civil Grand Juror.*

### **Coroner's Office Staffing**

According to the 2024 Coroner's Office Statistics Annual Report, the Fresno County Coroner's Office is staffed with one part-time Forensic Pathologist (960 hours annually, equivalent to approximately 0.46 full-time equivalent), one Senior Deputy Coroner, eight Deputy Coroners, two Forensic Technicians, two Program Technicians (Autopsy Technicians), and one Office Assistant. The absence of a full-time, in-house Forensic Pathologist necessitates reliance on contracted forensic pathology services to fulfill statutory medicolegal death investigation responsibilities.

Due to limited internal forensic pathology coverage, the County has entered into multiple professional service agreements to ensure continuity of autopsy services and expert testimony. In December 2022 and February 2023, the County executed BOS

approved agreements for forensic pathology services, each effective through May 31, 2025, with options for additional one-year renewals. Compensation under these agreements includes individual contract caps, with services consolidated under Master Service Agreement No. 24-014. Subsequent amendments in May 2024 and December 2024 added additional contracted Forensic Pathologists and increased the total authorized compensation ceiling to \$2,625,000. As of the most recent accounting, \$2,149,499 has been expended, leaving a remaining balance of \$475,501. The Master Service Agreement is scheduled to expire on January 8, 2027.

Under these agreements, contracted Forensic Pathologists provide comprehensive medicolegal services including:

- performance of routine and complicated autopsies in suspicious, homicide, and undetermined death cases;
- sudden unexpected Infant death investigations;
- external examinations;
- case review and research;
- trial preparation;
- pretrial conferences;
- court testimony

These services are essential to maintaining compliance with professional and best practice standards established by NAME, particularly in counties operating without full-time forensic pathology staffing.

The established fee schedule provides compensation of \$2,000 for routine autopsies, \$3,000 for complicated autopsies (including suspicious deaths, homicides, and Sudden Unexpected Infant Death cases), and \$500 for external examinations. Medical records review is provided at no additional charge. Case review and research are billed at \$500 per hour, not to exceed \$4,000 per day. Overall, the current hybrid staffing model reflects significant dependence on contracted forensic pathology services

to meet operational demands. While this approach provides necessary professional coverage, it concentrates fiscal resources within contractual expenditures and may present long-term sustainability considerations depending on annual case volume and renewal of service agreements.

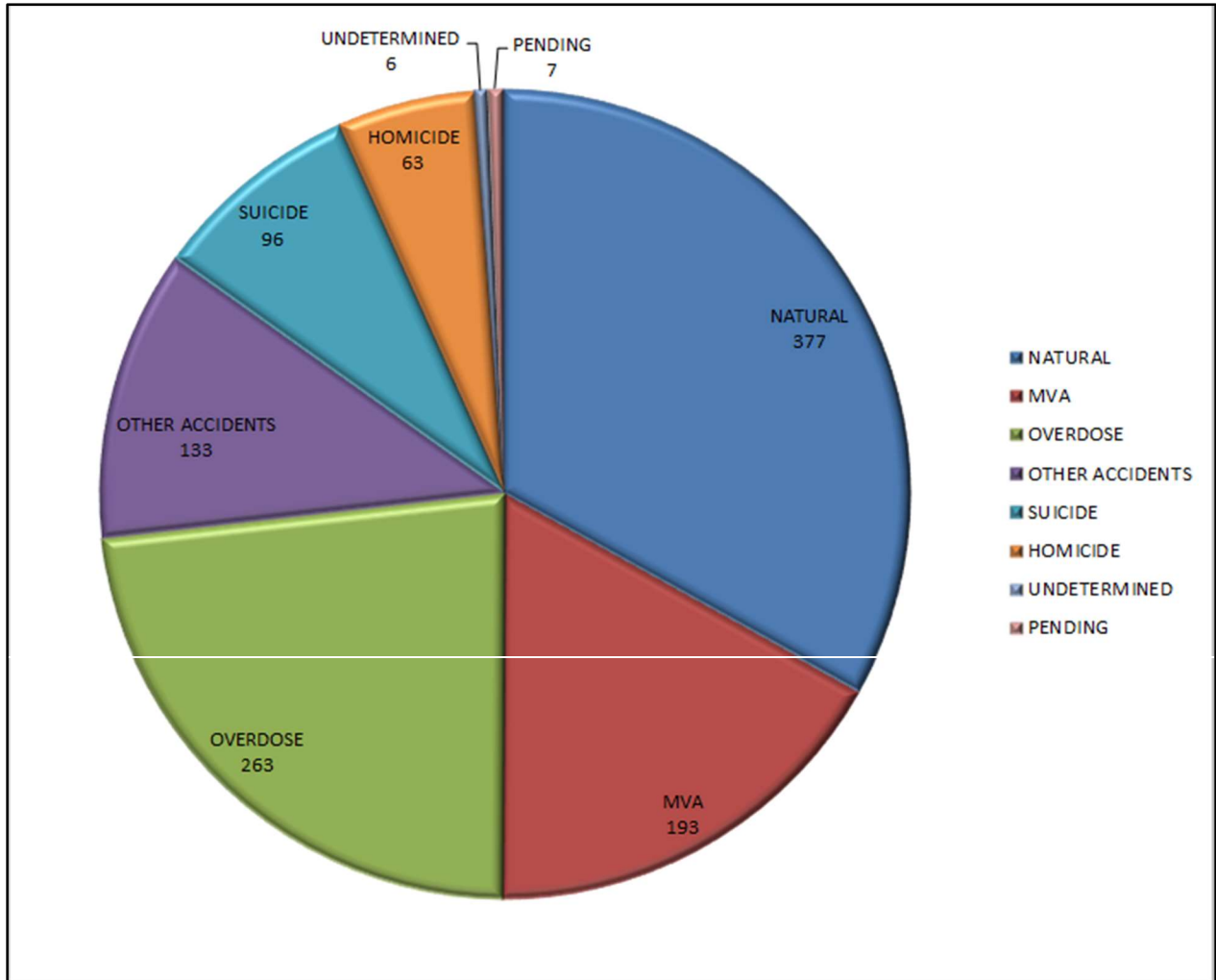
An article published April 23, 2025 in the Rochester First.com, there has been a slight growth of interest in the field of Forensic Pathology following the COVID-19 pandemic where these workers were considered essential and truly on the front lines of determining causes of death. The article states that typically 35 people complete and pass the board exams on a yearly basis – that is now about 45 to 50 people annually, and this is across the country. This number is barely outpacing the number of people leaving the practice. It is estimated that as of the date of this article there are 750 to 800 practicing Forensic Pathologists across the country.

In the July 2025 issue of The Pathologist, it was reported that as of 2022 approximately 750 of the 2,071 coroner and medical examiner offices nationwide were staffed by board-certified Forensic Pathologists. Each year, an estimated 30 to 60 Forensic Pathologists complete forensic pathology training, contributing to a workforce shortage. Contributing factors include reduced exposure to autopsy during medical education, the rescission of Medicare requirements related to autopsy services, and relatively low compensation in government-based offices. This number is significantly below what is needed to adequately serve the population and legal system.

The shortage of Forensic Pathologists in California and across the U.S. is a systemic workforce issue attributed to long and demanding training, high stress levels, geographic disparities, low compensation, and an aging workforce. This creates a concurrence of factors that perpetuate the shortage and impacts the ability of the nation to thoroughly investigate deaths.

## Case Loads

In 2024, there were 9,185 deaths in Fresno County. Of those deaths, 4,350 were reported to the Coroner unit for review. The Coroner's Office accepted 1,138 of those reported deaths as Coroner cases and performed an examination, toxicology testing, or medical record review to determine the cause and manner of death.



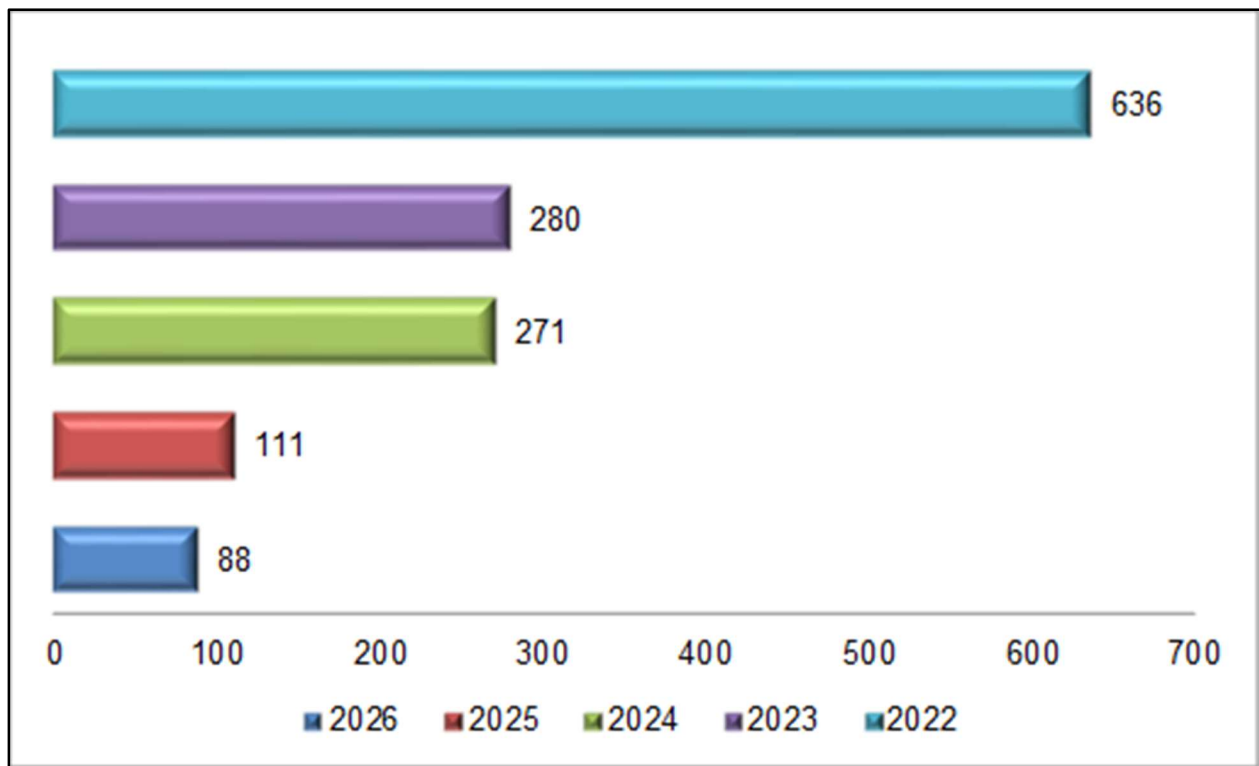
**2024 TOTAL CORONER CASES - PIE CHART FORMAT**

Between 2022 and 2026, Fresno County Deputy Coroners carried a total caseload of 1,164 open investigations. Open cases typically involve deaths requiring further examination into the circumstances and manner of death.

### Open Cases

The Coroner’s Office prioritizes the backlog of death certificates from open cases in the following manner:

- Focus on cases with legal or urgent needs.
- Prioritize deaths that require immediate burial or cremation.
- Address cases with family requests for timely closure or funeral.
- Streamline processes for straightforward cases with clear documentation.
- Collaborate with local agencies to expedite the identification and verification of deceased individuals.



**OPEN CASES 2022-2026 - BAR GRAPH FORMAT**

An office structured to manage 1,164 open cases should be established, consistent with accreditation performance benchmarks recommended by NAME. The Fresno County Coroner's Office is not currently accredited by NAME. However, this report cites NAME's "best practices," some of which are already reflected in the procedures and daily operations of Fresno County Deputy Coroners.

### **Staffing Recommendations for Pathologists**

In a county such as Fresno, which reviewed 4,350 deaths during 2024-2025 and accepted 1,138 cases as Coroner investigations, the recommended number of full-time Forensic Pathologists ranges from two to five, according to NAME. This recommendation is based on the number of cases typically managed within the Coroner's Office.

### **Integration of Coroner Duties**

In certain counties, the Sheriff also serves as the Coroner. In these instances, Coroner responsibilities are often integrated into the Sheriff's Office organizational structure. This integration impacts both staffing allocations and budgetary considerations, as Coroner staff may be counted within the broader Sheriff's Office framework.

### **Outsourcing of Autopsies**

It is widespread practice across the United States for counties to outsource autopsies to contracted Forensic Pathologists. This approach allows counties to access specialized expertise while managing costs efficiently.

Recommended staffing levels for a coroner's office with a case volume similar to the Fresno County Coroner's Office according to NAME include:

- Forensic Pathologists: 2-3 FTE forensic pathologists
- Deputy Coroners: 12
- Autopsy Technicians: 2-4
- Administrative/Support Staff: 2-3

As of March 1, 2026, the Non-Contracted Forensic Pathologist Salary in California average salary is \$364,810.

- Top Earners (90<sup>th</sup> percentile): \$438,000
- Majority Range (25<sup>th</sup>-75<sup>th</sup> percentile): \$342,410 to \$403,120
- Entry-Level (10<sup>th</sup> percentile): \$322,016

## **CONCLUSION**

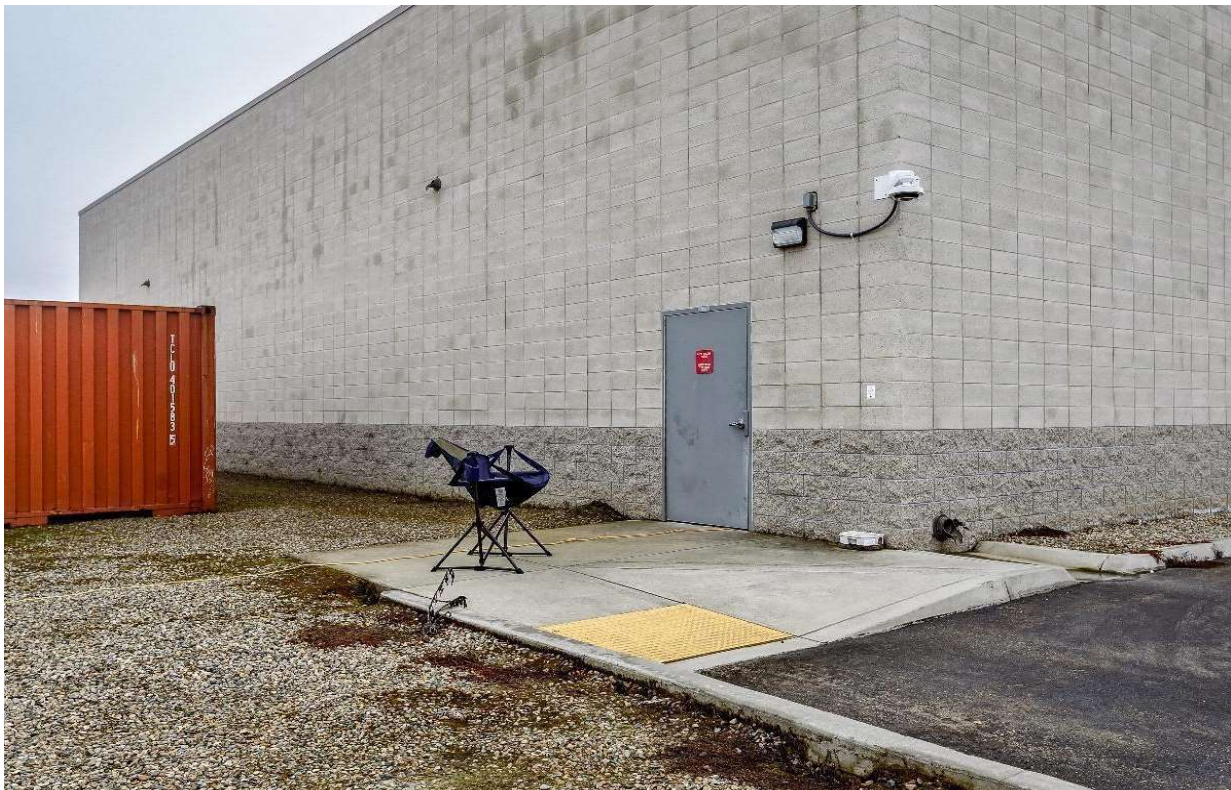
Working in the Coroner's Office requires a level of compassion that most people never see and rarely fully understand. The Civil Grand Jury in the course of its investigation observed significant compassion by the staff of the County Coroner's Office despite their less-than-ideal working conditions. Every day, staff walk into situations where someone's worst moment has just happened. They meet families in shock, in disbelief, in anger, in grief. Compassion in this work is not loud or dramatic; it is steady, quiet, and consistent.

This work demands passionate resilience. Staff see tragedy repeatedly - accidents, suicides, overdoses, homicides and natural deaths of people who were deeply loved. They cannot be mechanically detached. At the same time, they cannot succumb to their emotions every day. Compassion becomes disciplined; steady empathy without losing function. Compassion in the Coroner's Office is not softness, it is strength. It is showing up every day to serve the living and honor the dead.

The staff that work at the Coroner's Office deserve a place where they can decompress, take a much-needed break, eat lunch without being subjected to odors or being in close proximity to the deceased in the building. The current building does not have any of these basic or essential amenities. It is a concrete building that appears solidly constructed but has a minimalist and industrial appearance. It can also be described as institutional and functional, not particularly visually pleasing.

For several years, there have been ongoing plans to install three modular buildings in the vacant lot located in front of the current Coroner’s facility. Despite these intentions, the installation has yet to take place. According to the Sheriff’s Office 2025-2026 budget plan, these modular structures are slated for placement in the near future. Although these buildings are considered “temporary” and are not the ideal solution, they are urgently needed. The additional space will address the shortage of office accommodations, provide a quiet and comfortable room for staff to meet with families, and offer a dedicated area where employees can decompress away from their demanding work environment.

The continued efforts of these exceptional individuals require expanded facilities and essential staffing.



*A simple chair outside the Coroner’s Office serves as one of the few quiet spaces to decompress during difficult and often traumatic investigations.*

*Photo source: Civil Grand Juror.*

## **FINDINGS**

F1. We commend the Fresno County Coroner's Office staff for their consistent compassion, professionalism, and resilient service to families during some of the most difficult and traumatic moments in their lives.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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

## 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)

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)

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)

R4. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors should evaluate whether the current Sheriff-Coroner model provides optimal administrative oversight for forensic pathology to be completed by March 31, 2027. (F4, F5, F6, F7)

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)

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)

## RESPONSES REQUIRED

Pursuant to California Penal Code § 933(c), each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

All interviews with the Fresno County Civil Grand Jury are confidential (Penal Code § 929). Responses must be based on the findings and recommendations of the report, not the process of how the findings and recommendations were acquired.

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 limit 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 Civil 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:**

Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner (F2, F3, F7, F8), (R2, R5, R6)

**Required response within 90 days:**

Fresno County Board of Supervisors (F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8), (R1, R3, R4, R6)

**INVITED RESPONSES**

**Response within 60 days:**

Fresno County Chief Administrative Officer (F4, F5, F6), (R1, R3)

**Responses are to be sent to:**

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

**WORKS CITED**

Fresno County Civil Grand Jury Report 2006-2007

[Fresno County Superior Court - Civil Grand Jury Reports.](#)

Fresno County Civil Grand Jury Report 2013-2014

[Fresno County Superior Court - Civil Grand Jury Reports.](#)

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report 2013-2014

[Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Coroner's Office Inspection Report \(PDF\).](#)

Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner's Office

[Fresno County Sheriff-Coroner's Office Official Website.](#)

California Government Code

[California Government Code Section 27522 - Autopsy Requirements.](#)

[California Government Code Section 27491 - Coroner Duties and Death Investigations.](#)

County Administrative Office

[County Administrative Office.](#)

Fresno County Purchasing Services

[Fresno County Public Purchasing and Contracts Portal.](#)

The National Association of Medical Examiners

[National Association of Medical Examiners Official Website.](#)

Advanced Study.org

[Advance Study Article Regarding the Number of Forensic Pathologists in the United States.](#)

Rochester First.com

[Rochester First News Article: "Trends Show National Shortage of Forensic Pathologist Slowly Turning Corner," by Isabel Garcia, dated April 23, 2025.](#)

The Pathologist

[The Pathologist Article "The Expanding Role of Forensic Pathologists" by Kathryn Wighton, dated July 31, 2025.](#)

Salary.com

[California Forensic Pathologist Salary Information.](#)

## DISCLAIMER

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

You can help create a report like this. Go to  
[Apply here to participate in the civil grand jury](#)  
and apply to be a member of the Civil Grand Jury.  
Civil Grand Jury | Superior Court of California County of Fresno

If you have an issue with local government that the  
Civil Grand Jury should investigate go to:  
[Open the Citizen Complaint Form Here](#)  
Civil Grand Jury | Superior Court of California County of Fresno