



MEMORANDUM

Date: July 3, 2013

To: The Honorable Chairman and Members
Pima County Board of Supervisors

From: C.H. Huckelberry
County Administrator 

Re: **Report from the Chief Medical Examiner Regarding the Cost and Structure of Death Investigations in Arizona**

Given the Pima County Medical Examiner is the primary performer of autopsies for nine of Arizona's counties, it is important to evaluate our costs for providing these services.

Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Gregory Hess prepared the attached cost analysis based on a cost-per-capita basis. As can be seen, the Medical Examiner's Office in Pima County receives \$1.7 million in revenue and has a net cost-per-capita of \$1.30 per person, which compares very favorably among costs for such services throughout the State of Arizona.

Not only does the Medical Examiner deliver cost effective services, the services are of the highest quality in the State and is the only nationally accredited office in Arizona, meeting national norms for autopsy rates in 60 to 65 percent in all cases and completing reports and death certificates in a timely manner.

The office also supports ongoing research and other cause-of-death studies that have received national and international acclaim.

CHH/dph

Attachment

c: Dr. Gregory Hess, Chief Medical Examiner

PIMA COUNTY OFFICE OF THE MEDICAL EXAMINER FORENSIC SCIENCE CENTER

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TO: Chuck Huckelberry, County Administrator

FROM: Gregory L. Hess MD, Chief Medical Examiner *GH*

RE: Costs and Structure of Death Investigation and Death Certification in Arizona

DATE: June 26, 2013

Background

The systems in the United States used to investigate and certify unnatural, unidentified, unexpected or suspicious deaths are vastly different depending on where the death occurred. It is up to each individual state or municipality to determine what type of system to run and ultimately, how to fund that system. Because of this dissemination of authority, considerable confusion exists concerning how death investigation is structured and the terminology used to describe the responsible parties involved. Examples of general terminology and death investigation systems are listed below.

General Terminology

Forensic Pathologist – A physician (MD or DO), trained in Pathology with specialty training in Forensic Pathology.

Medical Examiner (ME) – An individual, often appointed (sometimes elected), often a physician (sometimes not a physician), who performs death investigations as dictated by the state or municipality.

Coroner – An individual, often elected, often not a physician, who performs death investigations as dictated by the state or municipality.

Death Investigation System Type

System Type	States
Medical Examiner in each county	AZ, MI
Coroner in each county	IN, SC, LA, ND, SD, NE, KS, WY, CO, ID, NV
District Medical Examiners	FL
Some counties with Medical Examiner some with Coroner	NY, PA, OH, WI, IL, MO, TX, CA, WA
State Medical Examiner, Coroner in each county	KY, MS, AR, MT
State Medical Examiner	ME, NH, VT, MA, CT, RI, NJ, MD, WV, VA, NC, TN, OK, NM, UT, OR
State Medical Examiner, Coroners in some counties, autonomous County Medical Examiner in some counties	GA, AL

Structure by County in Arizona

The State of Arizona utilizes a county based, appointed, medical examiner or alternate medical examiner (if a medical examiner is not ‘practicable’ A.R.S. §11-592) system to conduct death investigations and certify deaths that fall under the jurisdiction (A.R.S. §11-593) of the medical examiner in each county. In general, counties with smaller populations use alternate medical examiners who certify deaths without an autopsy. If an autopsy is required to certify a death or if an autopsy should be performed for legal purposes, the remains are examined at a larger regional facility such as the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) in the case of 10 counties (in addition to Pima) or the Coconino County Office of the Medical Examiner (CCOME) in the case of Navajo (in addition to Coconino). Although the Maricopa County Forensic Science Center (MCFSC) serves the largest population center in the state and maintains the largest facility, MCFSC funding is inadequate to meet all the needs of Maricopa County itself and precludes obtaining any regional case work and subsequent revenue.

Definitions (A.R.S. §11-591)

"Forensic pathologist" means a physician who has successfully completed a pathology residency and a forensic fellowship or has extensive experience performing forensic autopsies in an official capacity.

"Medical examiner" means a forensic pathologist who performs or directs the conduct of death investigations.

"Alternate medical examiner" means a physician who has training and competence in the principles of death investigation and who performs or directs the conduct of death investigations.

"Autopsy" means a surgical procedure in which internal organs are exposed, removed or examined for the identification of trauma or natural disease.

"External examination" means an external inspection of a body.

System Type by County in Arizona

County	System Type
Apache	Alternate medical examiner with autopsies performed in Albuquerque, NM or at the PCOME
Cochise	Medical Examiner, PCOME is the medical examiner
Coconino	Medical Examiner
Gila	Alternate medical examiner, PCOME for autopsies
Graham	Alternate medical examiner, PCOME for autopsies
Greenlee	Alternate medical examiner, PCOME for autopsies
La Paz	Alternate medical examiner, PCOME for autopsies
Maricopa	Medical Examiner
Mohave	Medical Examiner, contract position
Navajo	Alternate medical examiner, PCOME or CCOME for autopsies
Pima	Medical Examiner
Pinal	No appointed ME or alternate ME, PCOME for autopsies and some external examinations, contract forensic pathologist for external examinations
Santa Cruz	Medical Examiner, PCOME is the medical examiner
Yavapai	Medical Examiner
Yuma	Medical Examiner, PCOME for homicides or conflicts of interest with Yuma Regional Medical Center

Costs by County in Arizona

Each county must bear the cost of death investigation and certification as dictated by the expense of the system type used (as above) minus the revenue generated (if any). Below is a table listing each county with population (US Census Bureau 2012 estimate), budget, revenue (if applicable) and per capita cost. The table below is limited by the difficulty in obtaining budget information concerning death investigation from some counties who either did not respond to multiple inquiries or were not able to discern the information requested from their budget. Some budgets reflect different fiscal years and estimated budgets. Additionally, the costs of deaths on federal lands, such as Native American reservations, are not borne by the County in which the death occurred so the per capita costs may be artificially low in some counties with large populations on federal land. For example, the Gila River Indian Community was billed for \$81,559 in CY2012 by the PCOME; costs not reflected in Pinal County's budget but included in the population of the County. Capital expenditures are also not included, e.g., Yavapai County recently opened a new medical examiner facility.

Per Capita Cost by County in Arizona

County	Population	ME Budget	Revenue	Per Capita Cost
Apache	73,195	FY 11/12 = \$90,941	None reported	\$1.24/person
Cochise	132,088	FY 12/13 = \$375,000	None reported	\$2.84/person
Coconino	136,011	\$571,918	\$127,900	\$3.26/person with revenue \$4.20/person without revenue
Gila	53,144	FY 13/14 = \$130,000	None reported	\$2.45/person
Graham	37,416	\$45,000(est)	None reported	\$1.20/person
Greenlee	8,802	\$20,000(est)	None reported	\$2.27/person
La Paz	20,281	FY 12/13 = \$47,000	None reported	\$2.32/person
Maricopa	3,942,169	FY 12/13 = \$7,660,000	\$350,000	\$1.85/person with revenue \$1.94/person without revenue
Mohave	203,334	FY 13/14 = \$567,600	None reported	\$2.79/person
Navajo	107,094	FY 12/13 = \$290,000(est)	None reported	\$2.71/person
Pima	992,394	FY 12/13 = \$2,993,658	\$1,703,674	\$1.30/person with revenue \$3.02/person without revenue
Pinal	387,365	FY 11/12 = \$818,287	None reported	\$2.11/person
Santa Cruz	47,303	\$110,350 billed in CY2012	None reported	\$2.33/person
Yavapai	212,637	FY 13/14 = \$594,005	None reported	\$2.79/person
Yuma	200,022	FY 12/13 = \$456,916	None reported	\$2.28/person

Per Capita Cost by Counties with population greater than 200,000 in Arizona

County	Population	Per Capita Cost
Maricopa	3,942,169	\$1.85/person with revenue \$1.94/person without revenue
Mohave	203,334	\$2.79/person
Pima	992,394	\$1.30/person with revenue \$3.02/person without revenue
Pinal	387,365	\$2.11/person
Yavapai	212,637	\$2.79/person
Yuma	200,022	\$2.28/person

Summary

Pima County has the lowest per capita cost for death investigation and certification for counties with populations greater than 200,000, largely due to revenue generated by acting as a regional facility for other counties. Objectively, the PCOME also provides the highest quality service in the State by being the only nationally accredited office in Arizona, meeting national norms for autopsy rates (60-65% of cases), and completing reports and death certifications in a timely manner (95% of reports completed within 30 days of examination); accolades no other office in Arizona can claim. As you know, our current capacity and productivity are capped by our aged physical plant. Thank you for your continued support as we strive to maintain our accreditation status and improve upon our service to Pima and regional counties in the future.