

## What is a Coroner?

- The County Coroner is the elected official tasked with overseeing the medicolegal system of a county.
  - The medicolegal system is a unique confluence of investigative and medical skill sets.
- The Coroner is responsible for the final culmination of both the investigative and medical side of a death investigation for deaths in their jurisdiction.



## What Does a Coroner Do?

**The County Coroner investigates deaths to determine two factors:**

### 1. Cause of Death

Medical in nature. Aided by a Forensic Pathologist's investigation. This would include autopsies, toxicology testing, micro testing, and more. A Forensic Pathologist ONLY determines the medical cause of death, not the manner and mechanism of death.

### 2. Manner and Mechanism of Death

Investigation may include field work such as blood draws for testing, collecting decomp samples, and investigation of other factors; as well as coordination with law enforcement, doctors, and families; witness testimony, and more.



## What Deaths Does the County Coroner Investigate?

**The County Coroner investigates all deaths that are:**

- Violent, sudden, or unusual
- Unattended by a physician in the last 20 days (other than in hospice care)
- Of an unidentified individual
- Related to accident or injury, either old or recent
- Homicide, suicide, or accidental
- Due to criminal acts
- Due to SIDS

While there is a requirement to investigate a death, that does not mean that there is a requirement to conduct an autopsy.



## How Does the County Coroner Investigate the Cause of Death?

**The County Coroner does NOT conduct the autopsy.**

-The job of conducting an autopsy is for a medically training Forensic Pathologist. The Forensic Pathologist may be an employee of a County Coroner office or contracted by a County Coroner office. Currently there is only between 350-450 board certified Forensic Pathologists working in the United States.

- Toxicology tests to help determine a cause of death are sent to either the State Toxicology Lab, or a certified toxicology lab contracted by the County Coroner.
  - Other lab work as determined by the Forensic Pathologist to determine the cause of death.
  - Consulting with the deceased medical physicians (if known) and reviewing medical records.



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## How Does the County Coroner Investigate the Manner of Death?

In order to investigate the manner of death the County Coroner has legal authority to properly carry out their job, such as:

-Subpoena powers

-HIPPA exemptions for medical records and information

-After gathering the investigative materials a Coroner may determine that the manner of death was natural, accidental, homicidal, suicidal, pending, or indeterminate.



## What is the Different Between a Coroner and Medical Examiner?

-Typically the role of a Medical Examiner is appointed and not elected.

-Unlike the elected County Coroner, the Medical Examiner is a physician, typically a board-certified forensic pathologist by the American Board of Pathology.

-The Medical Examiner may conduct autopsies if credentialed.



## The Coroner / Medical Examiner System by County:

Washington is an elected County Coroner state with two exceptions:

-In counties under 40,000 in population, the elected County Prosecutor serves as ex-officio County Coroner (currently 14 counties\*).

-Charter counties can adopt their own medicolegal system. In six of the seven counties they have adopted a Medical Examiner system. One county has adopted a Prosecutor/Coroner system.

*\*Douglas County currently exceeds 40,000 residents and will move to an elected County Coroner system at the next election of county officials.*



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