

# **FORENSIC INVESTIGATIONS IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY: THE SLO COUNTY CRIME LABORATORY THE SLO COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report presents the 2013-2014 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury's inquiry into the conditions and management of the San Luis Obispo County Crime Laboratory (Crime Lab) and San Luis Obispo County Coroner's Office (Coroner's Office).

## **AUTHORITY**

Section 925 of the California Penal Code authorizes the Grand Jury to "investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county..."

## **METHOD**

The Grand Jury visited the Crime Lab and Coroner's Office and was briefed by the staff of those facilities on their operation and procedures. Additional information was obtained through follow-up communications with the Sheriff, detectives, and both Crime Lab and Coroner's Office personnel.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Sheriff's Office Crime Lab provides forensic services in support of local, state, and federal agencies. Those services include suspect identification, testing of body fluids for chemical and toxic substances, and gathering and processing of crime scene evidence. Specialized capability exists for drug testing focusing on the detection of methamphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, heroin and benzodiazepine tranquilizers. DNA and ballistics evidence requires unique instrumentation and expertise not available in-house and must be sent to laboratories outside San Obispo County.

The elected Sheriff-Coroner is responsible for all death investigations that occur within the County of San Luis Obispo. Those deaths occurring outside of a hospital, outside the presence of a physician and all other cases involving homicides, suicides, accidental deaths and deaths due to suspicious circumstances are investigated as mandated by state law. In addition, any deaths of persons under the age of 18 require the coroner's office involvement. For deaths that may occur under hospice care, the coroner's office maintains a hospice patient list to preclude the coroner from needing to investigate those deaths.

The Coroner's Office reviews and determines the cause of death before a death certificate can be issued. In order to determine the cause of death, many cases require an autopsy or medical examination. Autopsies are conducted by a certified forensic pathologist. The forensic pathologist serves three local counties and performs autopsies in San Luis Obispo County once a week. He is assisted by one of three full-time deputy coroners (coroner-investigators). The coroner-investigators receive 80 hours of training at a coroner school and then gain practical working experience on the job.

Prior to August 2012, the County leased facilities in a private mortuary in Los Osos and contracted with an independent Central Valley pathologist to conduct the autopsies. The forensic investigators had office space in the Sheriff's Office. The Coroner's Office was moved to a new permanent facility in a separate location from the Sheriff's Office in August of 2012. The permanent consolidated facility includes the administrative office, cooler, autopsy room, evidence room housing the evidence dryer and refrigerator-freezer, a sexual assault investigation room<sup>1</sup> and forensic investigation rooms along with a viewing room. It remains financially efficient, with operating costs for rent and cleaning equivalent to the costs before consolidation, further validating the justification for the consolidation. Locating all facilities that support the coroner in one location appears to have resulted in more efficient procedures.

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<sup>1</sup> A Sexual Assault Response Team nurse is available when required.

## NARRATIVE

### **Crime Laboratory:**

Members of the 2013-2014 Grand Jury visited the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Office Crime Laboratory on December 4, 2013. Grand Jurors were escorted by a detective and were introduced to the staff in charge of the various areas of the lab. Those areas include the Fingerprint and Fiber Analysis Lab, the Trace and Imaging Lab, the Chemical and Toxicology Lab and Staging Rooms. Grand Jurors also visited the Annex which contains a vehicle inspection lift, a ballistics chamber and records storage.

The Crime Lab is housed in a building also accommodating other Sheriff's offices and is very tight on office and lab space. Minor changes in layout to accommodate a new lab created additional temporary over-crowding as observed on our visit. Work space is limited and adding capabilities and equipment may not be feasible. Productivity and efficiency may be enhanced with expansion or movement to a larger facility.

The 2012-2013 Grand Jury report, *Forensic Investigations in San Luis Obispo County*, detailed the equipment and laboratories, much of which remains unchanged. New this year is the addition of an alcohol-related Driving Under the Influence Lab, just now being installed. Currently that testing is outsourced with a typical turnaround of three weeks. Creating the capability in-house has the potential of reducing that turnaround to less than one week. Also added this year is a new Crime Lab response vehicle, purchased through the Fleet Services Vehicle Replacement program and custom built to specifications provided by the Crime Lab. This vehicle is used to transport tools, equipment and supplies to and from crime scenes. In addition, it is used to secure and transport evidence collected from the crime scene to the laboratory. As this vehicle is state-of-the-art and larger than the vehicle it replaced, all crime scene processing can be accomplished in a single trip enhancing productivity of the Crime Lab.

## **Coroner's Office:**

The coroner-investigators wear many hats: they have the necessary medical, pharmaceutical and hazardous material handling knowledge, patrol experience and do much ad hoc grief counseling when needed. The coroner-investigators go into the field to investigate all relevant death scenes, take photographs, and collect all pertinent facts and evidence to assist in their determinations on cause of death. They use a checklist to insure no aspect of the investigation is omitted and have standardized forms in PDF format required by various agencies, such as the General Case Information form and the Medical Records Request form.

Some cases require the use of CAT scan equipment to create digital body images that can be rotated in three dimensions or manipulated with zoom capability on the computer monitor. This process is currently done by an outside vendor. All images are maintained indefinitely by the Coroner's Office and are separate from other Sheriff's department case materials.

The coroner-investigators perform all cleaning of the non-carpeted working rooms to ensure antiseptically clean surfaces, tools and equipment. The coroner-investigators handle movement of bodies using a modified pickup truck with bays for field equipment and space for the bodies. The three coroner-investigators alternate weeks of 24-hour on-call duty during which they may be called out for on-site investigations.

During calendar year 2013, the Coroner's Office had 1,385 reportable deaths in San Luis Obispo County. The coroner-investigators responded to 602 cases countywide, which is an increase of 9% over 2012. Of those cases, 254 required investigations of which 165 autopsies were performed, 56 medical inspections were conducted and 31 deaths were certified by medical records.

The Grand Jury found the Coroner's Office well equipped and well managed with documented procedures that enable their mission to be achieved in an efficient manner. The consolidation into a single location continues to serve the County in ways not possible before. Staff stated during the Grand Jury's visit that obtaining licenses for Adobe Photoshop image manipulation would be advantageous for the Coroner's Office staff.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Grand Jury found San Luis Obispo County has equipment, processes and trained personnel to ensure accurate forensic results in Crime Lab and Coroner cases.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Crime Laboratory:**

F1: The Crime Lab is housed in a facility that is cramped and over-crowded.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Crime Laboratory:**

R1: The space for the Crime Lab should be expanded or the Crime Lab moved to a larger facility.

## **COMMENDATIONS**

The Grand Jury commends the high degree of professionalism of management and staff at the Crime Lab and Coroner's Office. This includes the prompt responses to follow-up questions posed by the Grand Jury.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

The County Sheriff's Department is required to respond to Finding 1.

The County Sheriff's Department is required to respond to Recommendation 1.

| Presiding Judge  | Grand Jury  |
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| Presiding Judge Dodie Harman<br>Superior Court of California<br>1035 Palm Street Room 355<br>San Luis Obispo, CA 93408 | San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury<br>P.O. Box 4910<br>San Luis Obispo, CA 93403 |