
SENATE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Senator María Elena Durazo, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 1379
Author: Cervantes
Version: 3/25/26

Hearing Date: 4/15/26
Fiscal: Yes
Consultant: Peterson

COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE: SEPARATION OF COUNTY OFFICES: IN-CUSTODY REPORTS

Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate its sheriff and coroner offices and report specified information on the county's website.

Background

County governance. Counties fall into two types: “general law” and “charter.” General law counties are organized according to the generally applicable laws for county governance established by the Legislature that set the number, appointment, and election procedures for county officials, including the board of supervisors.

Charter counties have greater leeway to determine their own governance structure, including to elect additional supervisors and appoint or elect additional officers. A new charter, or the amendment of an existing charter, may be proposed by the Board of Supervisors, a charter commission, or an initiative petition. There are 14 charter counties: Alameda, Butte, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, Placer, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Tehama. Most large counties are charter counties: eight of the ten largest counties by population have adopted charters.

All counties elect or appoint a variety of county officials. The California Constitution requires all counties to elect a sheriff, district attorney, assessor, and board of supervisors, and state law lists the officers that general law counties must have. State law gives county boards of supervisors the authority to consolidate the duties of certain of the county offices by ordinance.

Duties of sheriff and coroner. The board of supervisors in a county can enact an ordinance to consolidate the sheriff and coroner into a single elected office. Whether combined or separate offices, the sheriff and coroner must both be elected unless voters in that county allow for an appointed coroner. However, the board can, by ordinance, abolish the office of coroner and instead appoint a medical examiner to carry out the coroner’s duties. A medical examiner must be a licensed physician and surgeon specializing in pathology.

Sheriffs have three primary duties: (1) police unincorporated areas, (2) operate the county jail, and (3) attend to and execute orders of the courts. In large counties, they manage thousands of employees, including both sworn peace officers and other non-sworn staff.

The county coroner is tasked with determining the circumstances, cause, and manner of certain deaths—such as deaths that are violent, sudden, or unusual, or potentially stem from criminal activity. Regardless of whether a county has a medical examiner, separate coroner, or sheriff-

coroner, a medical professional always performs the forensic autopsy to determine the cause of death. In response to concerns over interference in autopsies of deaths that involved law enforcement, the Legislature enacted SB 1189 (Pan, 2016). SB 1189 required forensic autopsies to be performed by a licensed physician and surgeon, and, where an individual dies as a result of law enforcement activity, prohibited law enforcement involved in the death from entering the autopsy room or having any involvement in the examination. However, SB 1189 still required the coroner—who may not be a medical professional—to determine the *manner* of death. While the circumstances and causes of death can vary widely, there are only five manners of death: natural, accidental, homicide, suicide, or undetermined.

Of California's 58 counties:

- 48 have consolidated their sheriff and coroner offices;
- Seven counties have independent medical examiners (Alameda, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Ventura); and
- Three counties have separate sheriff and coroner offices (Inyo, Sacramento, San Mateo).

Recent sheriff controversies. Over the last few years, law enforcement-involved deaths and alleged interference by sheriffs have led to legislative action.

San Joaquin County. In December 2017, the chief medical examiner in San Joaquin County resigned after documenting numerous incidents of alleged interference by the Sheriff in their death investigations, including changing the manner of death from “homicide” to “accident” in three cases of law enforcement-involved deaths. Medical professionals and others argue that the consolidated sheriff-coroner system presents an inherent conflict. In order to address this potential conflict, on April 24, 2018, the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors voted to create an independent Office of the Medical Examiner. SB 1303 (Pan, 2018) would have replaced the county office of the coroner or the sheriff-coroner’s office with an office of medical examiner in counties that have not adopted a charter and have 500,000 or more residents, or required these counties to adopt a policy requiring referral of death investigations to a county with a medical examiner's office for any case representing a potential conflict of interest. Governor Newsom vetoed SB 1303 with the following message:

“Counties have several options when delivering coroner services to the public. This decision is best left to the discretion of local elected officials who are in the best position to determine how their county offices are organized.”

Contra Costa County. According to various news reports, in December 2020, Angelo Quinto died in police custody while suffering a mental health episode. Quinto's family alleged that a responding officer knelt on Angelo's neck for nearly five minutes while another officer restrained his legs, causing Angelo to lose consciousness. He later died in the hospital. The Contra Costa County's Coroner Office, which is combined with its Sheriff's office, ruled the cause of Angelo's death was a result of “excited delirium.” In response to Quinto's death, and other incidents, the Legislature enacted AB 1196 (Gipson, 2020) and AB 490 (Gipson, 2021) to ban law enforcement from using chokeholds and restraints that lead to potential asphyxiation, and also restarted conversations about the separation of coroner and sheriff's offices to account for potential conflicts of interest. AB 1108 (Hart, 2025) commencing January 1, 2027, prohibits a sheriff-coroner, in any county where the offices of sheriff and coroner are combined, from determining the circumstances, manner, and cause of death for any in-custody death, as defined,

and instead requires the sheriff-coroner to contract with another county or third-party medical examination provider to determine the manner, circumstances, and cause of the in-custody death.

Riverside County. Riverside County consolidated their sheriff and coroner offices in 1999. Riverside County's Sheriff Department has come under scrutiny for the relatively high number of in-custody deaths. According to a 2025 article in the *New York Times*:

“Killings are relatively rare in American jails, but those in Riverside County experienced a surge in them. They had the highest homicide rate among large jails in California from 2020 through 2023, according to state data. The murders and other deaths made the county's five jails the second-deadliest in the nation during that period. In 2022, the jail system's worst year, 19 detainees would die from homicides, suicides, overdoses and natural causes... There were clear patterns of security lapses, negligence and policy violations that contributed to the six homicides in the county jails from 2020 through last year, The New York Times and The Desert Sun found. The California Department of Justice has been conducting a civil rights investigation, and more than a dozen lawsuits making wrongful death claims have been filed against Riverside County, which has paid more than \$13.3 million in settlements.”¹

In 2023, the board of supervisors authorized staff to complete a study on the separation of the sheriff and coroner offices. The study concluded:

“As a result of an extensive evaluation, the Executive Office has reached the conclusion that the negative impacts of separating the Coroner Bureau and/or Public Administrator from the Sheriff's Department significantly outweigh the perceived benefit and would not be in the best interests of the community. Additionally, the Executive Office has determined there are currently implemented measures and safeguards designed to provide increased transparency and public trust in the outcome of investigations involving uses of force, generally, and within the unique environment of a correctional setting.”

On March 12, 2024, the board voted unanimously to not separate the offices, and instead to contract with neighboring counties to perform autopsies and create a family liaison position to assist families with in-custody deaths.

In an effort to create more independence when it comes to investigating in-custody deaths, the author wants to separate the sheriff and coroner offices in Riverside County.

Proposed Law

Senate Bill 1379 requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027. For death investigations, the board must move the services to the coroner's office, and require the use of an independent medical examiner. The measure also provides that no one except the coroner or medical examiner can sign death certificates or postmortem examinations.

SB 1379 also requires the county to post the following on its website:

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/us/riverside-county-jails-homicides.html>

- An initial incident report of an in-custody death within 24 hours of the death;
- A preliminary report of an in-custody death within 72 hours of the death; and
- In-custody death data including the number of deaths, causes, demographic data, and medical response times.

The measure also defines its terms.

Comments

1. Purpose of the bill. According to the author, “Under current law, counties may consolidate the offices of sheriff and coroner. In Riverside County, this structure has contributed to persistent challenges regarding the deaths of individuals in custody in the county’s jails, including underreporting, inconsistent determinations of causes of death, and limited access to information for families and the public. In some cases, deaths involving trauma or neglect have been classified as ‘natural’ or ‘undetermined,’ raising serious concerns about investigative integrity and oversight. According to the Inland Empire Lives Lost report, between 2012 and 2022, over 226 people died while in custody in Riverside County jails. In addition, the County has had to pay out nearly \$100 million in taxpayer funds for judicial settlements related to in-custody deaths. Senate Bill 1379 would require the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the offices of county sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027, and employ an independent medical examiner model. By ensuring that in-custody deaths investigations are conducted by independent, qualified medical professionals and strengthening transparency requirements, SB 1379 will help renew public confidence in Riverside County’s justice system.”

2. Home rule. State law allows counties to consolidate various offices, including the sheriff and coroner. However, counties can also decide to retain separate positions, or adopt an ordinance to abolish the coroner position and provide instead for the office of an independent medical examiner. State law gives counties various options to respond to community concerns regarding the independence of the sheriff and coroner positions. Instead of keeping these decisions at the local level, SB 1379 decides that Riverside County should not have a consolidated sheriff-coroner position overriding the county’s conclusion that the costs outweighed the benefits. On the other hand, a significant number of deaths in custody and questions from the community persist.

3. Mandate. The California Constitution requires the state to reimburse local governments for the costs of new or expanded state mandated local programs. Because SB 1379 imposes new duties on local officials with respect to splitting county offices, Legislative Counsel says it imposes a new state mandate. The measure states that if the Commission on State Mandates determines that the bill imposes a reimbursable mandate, then reimbursement must be made pursuant to existing statutory provisions.

4. Special legislation. The California Constitution prohibits special legislation when a general law can apply (Section 16 of Article IV). SB 1379 does not contain findings and declarations explaining the need for legislation that applies only to the County of Riverside. The Committee may wish to consider amending the bill to include these findings and declarations.

5. Coming and going. The Senate Rules Committee has ordered a double referral of SB 1379: first to the Committee on Local Government to hear issues of county governance, and then to the

Committee on Public Safety.

Support and Opposition (4/10/2026)

Support: None Submitted

Opposition: California State Sheriffs' Association

-- END --