
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

SB 1379 (Cervantes) - County of Riverside: separation of county offices: in-custody reports

Version: April 23, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: May 11, 2026

Policy Vote: L. GOV. 5 - 1, PUB. S. 5 - 1

Mandate: Yes

Consultant: Mark McKenzie

Bill Summary: SB 1379 would require the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027, require medicolegal death investigation services to be moved to the coroner's office using an independent medical examiner, and require the County to publish specified information regarding in-custody serious incidents and deaths on its website.

Fiscal Impact:

- Unknown reimbursable mandate costs, potentially over \$1 million annually (General Fund), for Riverside County to establish separate offices of sheriff and coroner, require medicolegal death investigation services to be conducted through an independent medical examiner, and compile and report specified information on in-custody deaths and serious incidents on its website. Actual costs would be subject to a determination by the Commission on State Mandates regarding what local expenditures are deemed reimbursable, to the extent a successful reimbursement claim is filed by the County. (See Staff Comments)

Background: Existing law specifies a number of county officers, including a sheriff and coroner. While existing law requires both of these officers to be elected, they can be changed from elective to appointed if the voters approve such a proposal submitted by the board of supervisors. Existing law authorizes a board of supervisors, by ordinance, to consolidate the sheriff and coroner into a single elected office, or abolish the office of coroner and instead appoint a medical examiner to exercise the powers and perform the duties of the coroner. A medical examiner must be a licensed physician and surgeon qualified as a specialist in pathology.

The county coroner is responsible for determining the circumstances, cause, and manner of 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. The manner of death, however, must be determined by the coroner, who may or may not be a medical professional. While the circumstances and causes of death can vary widely, there are only five manners of death: natural, accidental, homicide, suicide, or undetermined.

The vast majority of counties in California (48 of 58 counties) have a combined sheriff-coroner structure. Only three (Inyo, Sacramento, and San Mateo) have separate sheriff and coroner offices. The primary reasons for consolidating the offices are financial, because the maintenance and operation of separate offices is expensive (and

especially burdensome for smaller counties), and functional, because many deaths that must be investigated by a coroner have a criminal or law enforcement components. Currently, seven counties have independent medical examiners that perform the functions of the coroner: Alameda, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Ventura.

In December 2017, the chief medical examiner in San Joaquin County and another forensic pathologist working under the Sheriff-Coroner 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 conflicts, the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors voted to create an independent Office of the Medical Examiner on April 24, 2018.

More recently, in December 2020, 30-year-old Navy veteran and Antioch resident Angelo Quinto died in police custody while suffering a mental health episode. Quinto’s family alleged that on the night he was taken into custody, officers knelt on Quinto’s neck for nearly 5 minutes until he became unresponsive, a claim disputed by police. Quinto died in the hospital 3 days later, and the Contra Costa County Sheriff-Coroner’s Office ruled that the death was a result of “excited delirium.” In response to Quinto’s death, and other incidents, the Legislature enacted several measures 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 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. A 2025 New York Times article noted that Riverside County had the highest homicide rate among large jails in California from 2020-2023, and more than a dozen lawsuits making wrongful death claims have been filed against the County, which has paid more than \$13.3 million in settlements.

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.

Proposed Law: SB 1379 would require the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027 and impose the following requirements on the County:

- Require the Board of Supervisors to move medicolegal death investigation services to the coroner's office and require the use of an independent medical examiner model for those services.
- Prohibit anyone other than the coroner or a medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
- Require Riverside County to post the following information on its website:
 - 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.
 - In-custody death data in a centralized public database that includes the number of deaths by facility, the cause for each death, demographic data of the deceased, and medical response times to the incident resulting in death.
 - A notice of each in-custody serious incident, including a suicide attempt, a drug overdose, including any Narcan reversal, a person suffering severe withdrawal symptoms, a person suffering medical distress during restraint, and any time a person's medical requests are repeatedly ignored.

Related Legislation: AB 1108 (Hart), Chap. 389/2025, prohibits a sheriff-coroner, beginning on January 1, 2027 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, as specified.

AB 1608 (Gipson), which failed passage on the Senate Floor in 2022, would have eliminated the authority for counties to consolidate the offices of sheriff and coroner, and required counties that have consolidated offices as of January 1, 2023 to separate those offices, as specified.

SB 1303 (Pan), which was vetoed by Governor Brown in 2018, would have replaced the office of coroner or sheriff-coroner with an independent office of the medical examiner in non-charter counties with 500,000 or more residents, or allow counties to retain the sheriff-coroner position and adopt a policy to refer cases where the sheriff-coroner may have a conflict to a county that has an independent medical examiner. The veto message stated, in part:

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.

Staff Comments: This bill imposes a state-mandate on Riverside County by requiring the separation of the consolidated sheriff-coroner office into separate entities. To the extent Riverside County files a mandate reimbursement claim that is approved by the

Commission on State Mandates, the state General Fund would reimburse the County for approved local costs to establish and operate separate sheriff and coroner offices, as specified. The County would also incur additional costs to use an independent medical examiner model to provide medicolegal death investigation services, and to publish specified information on its website regarding in-custody deaths and serious incidents, which also includes building a centralized public database that hosts specified information on in-custody deaths. While actual costs would depend upon a determination by the Commission regarding what specific county claimed expenditures are deemed reimbursable, staff estimates that state costs to reimburse Riverside County to separate the sheriff and coroner into stand-alone offices would likely exceed \$1 million, not including potentially reimbursable costs for implementing a medical examiner model for investigation services, and collecting and posting specified information on the County's website. The County would likely incur one-time costs to develop and establish an administrative structure, develop and adopt policies and procedures, hire new staff, conduct staff training and certifications, and purchase any necessary equipment, as well as ongoing costs for staff and operating expenses of the separated office.

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