
THIRD READING

Bill No: SB 1379
Author: Cervantes (D)
Amended: 4/23/26
Vote: 21

SENATE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE: 5-1, 4/15/26
AYES: Durazo, Arreguín, Ashby, Cervantes, Laird
NOES: Choi
NO VOTE RECORDED: Seyarto

SENATE PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE: 5-1, 4/21/26
AYES: Arreguín, Caballero, Cortese, Pérez, Wiener
NOES: Seyarto

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 5-2, 5/14/26
AYES: Cervantes, Cabaldon, Grayson, Richardson, Wahab
NOES: Seyarto, Dahle

SUBJECT: County of Riverside: separation of county offices: in-custody reports

SOURCE: Author

DIGEST: This bill requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate its sheriff and coroner offices and report specified information on the county's website.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Provides that officers of a county include a sheriff and coroner, among others.

- 2) Authorizes county boards of supervisors to consolidate by ordinance the duties of certain county offices into one or more combinations, including the sheriff and the coroner.
- 3) Authorizes the board of supervisors to abolish by ordinance the office of coroner and provide instead for the office of medical examiner, to be appointed by the board and to exercise the powers and perform the duties of the coroner. The medical examiner shall be a licensed physician and surgeon duly qualified as a specialist in pathology.
- 4) Requires coroners to determine the manner, circumstances and cause of death in specified circumstances.
- 5) Prohibits sheriff-coroners, in any county where those offices are consolidated, from determining the circumstances, manner and cause of death for any in-custody death, and instead requires sheriff-coroners to either contract with another county that has an independent coroner's office or office of the medical examiner, or to contract with a third-party medical examination provider that is "separate and independent" from the office of the sheriff-coroner to make that evaluation, as specified.
- 6) Provides that a forensic autopsy shall only be conducted by a licensed physician and surgeon, and that the results of a forensic autopsy shall only be determined by a licensed physician and surgeon.

This bill:

- 1) Requires the County of Riverside Board of Supervisors to separate the county offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027.
- 2) Moves medicolegal death investigation services to the coroner's office and requires the use of an independent medical examiner model for those services.
- 3) Prohibits anyone other than the coroner or a medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
- 4) Requires the county to post the following on its website:
 - a) An initial incident report of an in-custody death within 24 hours of the death;
 - b) A preliminary report of an in-custody death within 72 hours of the death;and

- c) In-custody death data including the number of deaths, causes, demographic data, and medical response times.

Background

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

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.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: Yes

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee: “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.”

SUPPORT: (Verified 5/14/26)

ACLU California Action
California Public Defenders Association
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
Justice2Jobs Coalition
La Defensa
Smart Justice California, a Project of Beyond Impact

OPPOSITION: (Verified 5/14/26)

California Association of Public Administrators, Public Guardians and Public Conservators
California State Sheriffs' Association
County of Fresno
Riverside County Sheriff's Office

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**** END ****