

Date of Hearing: August 5, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 1379 (Cervantes) – As Amended June 23, 2026

Policy Committee:	Local Government	Vote:	8 - 2
	Public Safety		7 - 2

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: Yes Reimbursable: Yes

SUMMARY:

This bill requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027.

Additionally, this bill, among other provisions:

- 1) Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, for medicolegal death investigation services, to move the services to the coroner's office and require the use of an independent medical examiner model for the services.
- 2) Prohibits a person other than the coroner or a medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
- 3) Requires Riverside County to publish the following in-custody death information on its website: (a) an initial incident report within 24 hours of the death, (b) a preliminary report within 72 hours of the death, (c) in-custody death data in a centralized public database, (d) a notice of each in-custody serious incident, as described, and (e) any Department of Justice (DOJ) in-custody death reporting form submitted to the DOJ for an in-custody death.
- 4) Requires Riverside County to notify the next of kin of the cause of death of an in-custody death within 72 hours of the determination of the cause of death and defines "in-custody death" for these purposes.
- 5) Provides numerous protections for workers who are transferred or reassigned due to the office separation, including, among other things, that an affected employee remain within the same recognized bargaining unit and retain all rights, benefits, retirement status, seniority, compensation, and representation status applicable immediately prior to the transfer.
- 6) Requires an affected employee who holds peace officer status as a corner or deputy corner, to retain, or be placed in, a classification qualifying for such peace officer status until the memorandum of understanding (MOU) in effect on the date this bill is enacted expires.

FISCAL EFFECT:

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 (GF) would reimburse the county for approved local costs to establish and operate separate sheriff and coroner offices.

The amount of these costs is unknown but likely over \$1 million annually (GF), 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, which also includes building a centralized public database that hosts specified information on in-custody deaths. The county may also incur one-time costs to establish an administrative structure, develop and adopt policies and procedures, and purchase any necessary equipment, as well as ongoing costs for staff and operating expenses of the separated office.

Actual GF costs are subject to a determination by the Commission on State Mandates regarding what local expenditures are deemed reimbursable.

COMMENTS:

1) **Purpose.** 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. [This bill] will help renew public confidence in Riverside County's justice system.

2) **Background. Sheriff-Coroner.** The California Constitution requires all counties to elect, among other offices, a sheriff. The county coroner position may be elected or appointed, depending on the county's governance structure. 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.

Existing law makes the county coroner 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.

Forty-eight of California's 58 counties have a combined sheriff-coroner office. Only three have separate sheriff and coroner offices. A county typically consolidates the offices because maintaining and operating separate offices is expensive (and especially burdensome for

smaller counties), and because many deaths that must be investigated by a coroner have a criminal or law enforcement component. The remaining seven counties (larger, better-resourced counties) have an independent medical examiner that performs the functions of the coroner.

Medical professionals and others argue that the consolidated sheriff-coroner system presents an inherent conflict because, while medical experts determine the cause of death, the sheriff, as an elected official, possesses final say in determining the manner of death.

Riverside County. Riverside County operates a combined sheriff-coroner office. The 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 the Riverside County jail had the highest homicide rate among large jails in California from 2020 to 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, "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." 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.

- 3) **Support and Opposition.** This bill is supported by the California Public Defenders Association, the Drug Policy Alliance, ACLU California Action, and human rights groups. ACLU asserts, "As long as sheriff-coroner offices remain combined, the inherent conflict of interests will obscure the truth about how loved ones died under the Sheriff's custody." They contend the approach of "separating the sheriff and coroner in a county with a disproportionate number of in-custody deaths is an important first step in the right direction."

This bill is opposed by the Riverside County Sheriff's Office, the California State Sheriffs' Association (CSSA), and a handful of local jurisdictions. CSSA asserts, "Separating these offices will remove investigative efficiencies and drastically increase county costs unnecessarily by requiring the county to stand up a separate coroner office." They also contend, from a governance perspective, that the bill is "heavy-handed and disregards local control" and that establishment of a separate coroner's office is a "decision best left to the sound discretion of local officials who have budget authority and relevant local experience."

- 4) **Related Legislation.** AB 1108 (Hart), Chapter 389, Statutes of 2025, prohibits a sheriff-coroner, beginning January 1, 2027, in any county where the offices of sheriff and coroner are combined (including Riverside County) from determining the circumstances, manner, and cause of death for an in-custody death, and instead requires the sheriff-coroner to contract with either (a) another county that has a coroner's office that operates independently from the office of the sheriff, or that has established an office of medical examiner, or (b) private, third-party medical examination providers that are separate and independent from sheriff-coroner's office to determine the manner, circumstances, and cause of the in-custody death.