

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 1379 (Cervantes)
As Amended August 13, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate its sheriff and coroner offices, abolish the office of coroner and provide instead for the office of medical examiner, transfer employees of the coroner's office to the medical examiner's office, publish specified information regarding in-custody deaths or serious incidents on the county's website, and notify the next of kin of the cause of death within specified timeframes.

Major Provisions

- 1) Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to do all of the following by July 1, 2027:
 - a) Separate the offices of sheriff and coroner pursuant to existing law, as specified.
 - b) Abolish the office of coroner and provide instead for the office of medical examiner pursuant to existing law, as specified.
 - c) Transfer each employee of the coroner's office, including each employee's functions, duties, classification, and position, to the office of medical examiner.
- 2) Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to move medicolegal death investigation services to the office of medical examiner.
- 3) Prohibits a person other than the medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
- 4) Provides that both of the following apply to an employee represented by a recognized employee organization on the date this bill is enacted who is transferred, reassigned, reclassified, retitled, or moved to a different office or agency as a result of this bill:
 - a) They shall remain within the same recognized bargaining unit.
 - b) They shall continue to be represented by the employee organization that served as the employee's exclusive representative immediately prior to the transfer.
- 5) Provides that an employee transferred pursuant to this bill shall retain all rights, benefits, retirement status, seniority, compensation, and representation status applicable immediately prior to the transfer.
- 6) Provides that an affected employee who holds peace officer status shall retain, or be placed in, a classification qualifying for peace officer status until the expiration of the memorandum of understanding that is in effect on the date this bill is enacted, as specified.
- 7) Provides that the transfer of functions, duties, classifications, positions, or employees pursuant to this bill shall not constitute grounds for any of the following:

- a) The creation of a new bargaining unit.
 - b) The modification of an existing bargaining unit.
 - c) The removal of an employee from a bargaining unit represented by the affected employee organization.
- 8) Provides that the implementation of this bill shall not diminish, impair, alter, or affect the rights of a recognized employee organization or any memorandum of understanding in effect on the date this bill is enacted.
- 9) Requires Riverside County to publish all of 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.
 - c) In-custody death data in a centralized database that includes, but is not limited to, all of the following: the number of deaths by facility, the cause of death for each death, demographic data of the deceased, and medical response times to the incident resulting in the death.
 - d) A notice of each in-custody serious incident, including, but not limited to, all of the following:
 - i) A suicide attempt.
 - ii) A drug overdose, including any Narcan reversal.
 - iii) A person suffering severe withdrawal symptoms.
 - iv) A person suffering medical distress during restraint.
 - v) Any time a person's medical request is ignored and that person is subsequently taken to the hospital.
 - e) Any Department of Justice (DOJ) in-custody death reporting form submitted to the DOJ for an in-custody death.
- 10) Requires the 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.
- 11) Defines "in-custody death" to mean the death of a person who is any of the following:
- a) Detained, under arrest, or in the process of being arrested by the Riverside County sheriff's office.
 - b) En route to be incarcerated by the Riverside County sheriff's office.
 - c) Incarcerated at a Riverside County jail.

- d) At a medical facility while in custody of the Riverside County sheriff's office.

COMMENTS

- 1) *Offices of the Sheriff and Coroner.* The California Constitution specifies that the sheriff is an elected office, while the coroner may be elected or appointed, depending on the county's governance structure. State law permits counties – whether general law or charter – to combine the sheriff and coroner into a single elected office. This combined office is specified in the charters of some counties. For general law counties or charter counties whose charters do not specify a sheriff-coroner model, the board of supervisors may enact an ordinance to consolidate the offices. Alternatively, the board of supervisors may, 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.

Of California's 58 counties, 48 have consolidated the sheriff and coroner into a single office. Three counties – Inyo, Sacramento, and San Mateo – maintain separate offices for the sheriff and the coroner. The remaining seven counties – Alameda, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Ventura – have adopted an independent medical examiner model.

- 2) *Responsibilities of the Sheriff and Coroner.* Under existing law, the sheriff is responsible for preserving the peace and, to accomplish this objective, is authorized to sponsor, supervise or participate in any object of crime prevention, rehabilitation of persons previously convicted of crime, or the suppression of delinquency.

The coroner's office is generally responsible for medical, investigative, and administrative duties related to death investigations. Medical responsibilities include performing autopsies and determining causes of death for cases under the coroner's jurisdiction. Investigative responsibilities include conducting investigations into the cause of death and identifying deceased individuals, including holding inquests when necessary. Administrative responsibilities include managing records, responding to inquiries, and securing valuables from the deceased.

The coroner is legally responsible for determining the cause, manner, and circumstances of deaths that are, among other things, violent, sudden, or unusual; unattended; or, potentially criminal in nature. Further, the coroner has discretion to conduct autopsies upon any victim of a death that is sudden, unexpected, unexplained, or known or suspected of resulting from an accident, suicide, or apparent criminal means. A death that occurred during or soon after the deceased individual interacted with law enforcement may, therefore, fall under the jurisdiction of the coroner.

- 3) *Recent Legislation.* The Legislature enacted SB 1189 (Pan), Chapter 787, Statutes of 2016, to address concerns about interference in autopsies where the death involves law enforcement. SB 1189 required forensic autopsies to be performed by a licensed physician and surgeon, regardless of the county office structure. SB 1189 prohibited, when an individual dies as a result of law enforcement activity, law enforcement personnel involved in the death from entering the autopsy suite or having any involvement in the examination. However, the coroner – who may not be a medical professional – still determines 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.

AB 360 (Gipson), Chapter 431, Statutes of 2023, prohibited excited delirium from being recognized as a valid medical diagnosis or cause of death.

AB 1108 (Hart), Chapter 389, Statutes of 2025, prohibited 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, and instead required 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. AB 1108 contained a delayed operative date of January 1, 2027.

- 4) *Riverside County*. Riverside County consolidated their sheriff and coroner offices in 1999. The Riverside County's Sheriff Department has come under scrutiny for its 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."

In 2023, the Riverside County 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.

Please refer to policy committee analyses for additional information regarding this 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."

Arguments in Support

The American Civil Liberties Union California Action writes, "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. While this issue persists throughout California, SB 1379's approach of separating the offices of the sheriff and coroner in a county with a disproportionate number of in-custody deaths is an important step in the right direction. The costs associated with SB 1379 are outweighed by State's obligation to provide impacted families closure and the truth. SB 1379 will also reduce the litigation costs associated with these families suing the Riverside Sheriff's Department for documentation surrounding their loved one's death..."

"SB 1379 will ensure that medical examinations and investigations of sudden, violent, or unexplained/suspicious deaths in Riverside County jails are conducted with integrity, providing families with the closure and dignity they deserve. Moreover, these objective medical reports will help Riverside County implement the necessary reforms to drive down their epidemic of in-custody deaths, producing long-term litigation cost savings. As long as Sheriff-Coroner Offices are allowed to conduct medical examinations for law enforcement-involved incidents, conflicts of interest and bias will get in the way of the truth."

Arguments in Opposition

The California State Sheriffs' Association states, "The current sheriff-coroner model utilized by choice by a vast majority of California's counties (48 of 58) enjoys the benefit of operational and budgetary efficiency. Separating these offices will remove investigative efficiencies and drastically increase county costs unnecessarily by requiring the county to stand up a separate coroner office."

"From a governance perspective, this bill is heavy-handed and disregards local control. Existing law already permits counties to pursue multiple models of county office consolidation or separation. In fact, in late 2023, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors directed its Executive Office to evaluate separating the coroner's bureau from the sheriff's department. Having done that, the Executive Office communicated the following to the Board: 'As a result of an extensive evaluation, the Executive Office has reached the conclusion that the negative impacts of separating the Coroner's 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.'"

"This is a decision best left to the sound discretion of local officials who have budget authority and relevant local experience."

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee:

This bill imposes a state-mandate on Riverside County by requiring the county to separate the consolidated offices of the sheriff and coroner, abolish the office of coroner, and provide instead for the office of medical examiner. 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 medical examiner 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 medical examiner, move medicolegal death investigation services to the office of 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 new office.

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

VOTES**SENATE FLOOR: 30-9-1**

YES: Allen, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Cortese, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Hurtado, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Padilla, Pérez, Reyes, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

NO: Alvarado-Gil, Choi, Dahle, Grove, Jones, Ochoa Bogh, Seyarto, Strickland, Valladares

ABS, ABST OR NV: Niello

ASM LOCAL GOVERNMENT: 8-2-0

YES: Carrillo, Pacheco, Fong, Ransom, Blanca Rubio, Stefani, Ward, Wilson

NO: Ta, Alanis

ASM PUBLIC SAFETY: 7-2-0

YES: Schultz, Mark González, Haney, Harabedian, Nguyen, Ramos, Sharp-Collins

NO: Alanis, Lackey

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-4-0

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache

NO: Hoover, Dixon, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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