UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Bill No: SB 1379
Author: Cervantes (D), et al.
Amended: 8/13/26
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

SENATE FLOOR: 30-9, 5/19/26
AYES: 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
NOES: Alvarado-Gil, Choi, Dahle, Grove, Jones, Ochoa Bogh, Seyarto, Strickland, Valladares
NO VOTE RECORDED: Niello

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 59-19, 8/25/26 - See last page for vote

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, abolish the coroner office, transfer the coroner functions to an office of medical examiner, report specified information on in-custody deaths on the county's website, and notify the next of kin of the cause of death of an in-custody death within 72 hours of the determination.

Assembly Amendments (1) require Riverside County to abolish the coroner office and create a new office of the medical examiner, (2) transfer employees from the coroner office to the medical examiner office as specified, (3) expand the information the county must post on its website, and (4) require the county to notify the next of kin of the cause of death of an in-custody death within 72 hours of the determination.

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 do all the following by July 1, 2027:
   a) Separate the offices of sheriff and coroner;
   b) Abolish the office of coroner and create the office of medical examiner; and
   c) Transfer each employee of the coroner's office to the office of the medical examiner.
2) Moves medicolegal death investigation services to the office of the medical examiner.
3) Prohibits anyone other than the medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
4) Provides that both the following apply to employees represented by a recognized employee organization upon the transfer in offices:
   a) They must remain with the same recognized bargaining unit; and
   b) They must continue to be represented by the by the employee organization that served as the employee's exclusive representative immediately prior to the transfer.
5) Provides that a transferred employee must retain all rights, benefits, retirement status, seniority, compensation, and representation status applicable immediately prior to the transfer.
6) Requires that affected employees who hold peace officer status must retain that status until the expiration of the memorandum of understanding currently in effect.
7) Provides that the transfer of employees does not constitute grounds for the creation of a new bargaining unit, the modification of an existing bargaining unit, or the removal of an employee from a bargaining unit.
8) Provides that the implementation of this bill does not change the rights of a recognized employee organization or any memorandum of understanding currently in effect.

9) 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;

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

   d) A notice of each in-custody serious incident as specified; and

   e) Any Department of Justice (DOJ) in-custody death reporting form submitted to 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.

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, and makes the county create a new office of the medical examiner. 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 Assembly Appropriations Committee:

- 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.

SUPPORT: (Verified 8/25/26)

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

OPPOSITION: (Verified 8/25/26)

California Association of Public Administrators, Public Guardians and Public Conservators
California State Sheriffs' Association
City of Indian Wells
City of Palm Desert
County of Fresno
Riverside County Sheriff's Office

Assembly Floor 59 19 1 SB 1379 Cervantes Senate Third Reading By Jackson
Ayes: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alvarez, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Carrillo, Connolly, Elhawary, Fong, Gabriel, Garcia, Gipson, Mark González, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Irwin, Jackson, Kalra, Krell, Lee, Lowenthal, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Patel, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Ransom, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Blanca Rubio, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Soria, Stefani, Valencia, Ward, Wicks, Wilson, Zbur, Rivas
Noes: Alanis, Castillo, Chen, Davies, DeMaio, Dixon, Ellis, Flora, Jeff Gonzalez, Hadwick, Hoover, Johnson, Lackey, Macedo, Patterson, Sanchez, Ta, Tangipa, Wallis
No Vote Recorded: McKinnor

Prepared by: Jonathan Peterson / L. GOV. / (916) 651-4119
11/13/26 9:45:26

****** END ******