MOTION BY SUPERVISOR HILDA L. SOLIS   November 26, 2019

Changing the Name of the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner to the

Department of Medical Examiner

The Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner has a hybrid name, which causes

confusion and a lack of clarity about the Department's structure and its standing as an

unbiased and independent investigative agency, within the forensics community, law

enforcement agencies and with the general public.

In the United States, there are two systems for medicolegal death investigations

– the coroner system and the medical examiner system. The coroner system is an

older system that originated in the United States in the 1700's. In this system, coroners

are usually elected, usually not physicians, often have minimal requirements, and may

have other duties that take priority over medicolegal death investigations.

First created in 1918 in the City of New York, the medical examiner system is

more contemporary. In contrast to the coroner system, medical examiners are almost

always physicians, are appointed by the governing body, and are usually trained

specialists in the fields of pathology or forensic pathology to perform death

investigations.

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                    RIDLEY-THOMAS_____

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While medical examiners and coroners under California law are functional equivalents, having the same responsibilities and authority, the two systems are structurally different.

California Government Code *§24010* allows counties to operate either a medical examiner or a coroner system. It allows a Board of Supervisors, by ordinance, to "abolish the office of coroner and provide instead for the office of medical examiner, to be appointed by the said 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."

Most counties in California operate as a variant of the coroner system called a Sheriff-Coroner, where the Coroner is either the Sheriff or heads a division within the Sheriff's Department. Medical examiners, however, are separate from law enforcement and are physicians trained in death investigation, i.e. forensic pathologists. Five counties in California, including Los Angeles, function as a medical examiner system.

When the Department's structure changed to be led by a Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner, its name was also changed from Department of Coroner to the current hybrid name, Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner. On the national stage, and even within California, the hybrid term "Medical Examiner-Coroner" causes confusion as to the Department's true structure and status as an independent investigative agency. It is important that a large county such as Los Angeles projects clarity and accuracy in this regard, since confusion in the name of the department could negatively impact both perceptions and understanding within the national forensic community and have a negative impact on recruitment efforts. Specifically, it is

important that forensic pathologists who may wish to work with the Department know that they can provide independent medicolegal opinions free from risk of a pre-conceived or goal-oriented result. Renaming the Department to Department of Medical Examiner would more accurately represent its current independent nature and the existing structure. While the peace officer status of the Department's Coroner Investigators, Coroner Investigator Trainees, and Supervising Coroner Investigators I and II under Penal Code Section 830.35 would not change, clarity in the Department name will help to mitigate any potential misconceptions about the Department's independence from the investigating law enforcement agency and any negative impact on public confidence.

   I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner and other relevant departments to commence the process of changing the department's name to "Department of Medical Examiner", updating position titles and performing other routine changes throughout the Department to align with this change.

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