

Date of Hearing: June 17, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Juan Carrillo, Chair

SB 1379 (Cervantes) – As Amended June 9, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 30-9

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

SUMMARY: Requires the County of Riverside (Riverside County) Board of Supervisors to separate its sheriff and coroner offices, report specified information on the county's website, and notify the next of kin of the cause of death of an in-custody death. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the county offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027.
- 2) Requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to do both of the following for medicolegal death investigation services:
 - a) Move the services to the coroner's office.
 - b) Require the use of an independent medical examiner model for the services.
- 3) Prohibits a person other than the coroner or a medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.
- 4) Requires Riverside 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 in a centralized database that includes, but is not limited to, 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.
- 5) 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.
- 6) Defines “in-custody death” to mean the death of a person who is any of the following:
 - a) Detained, under arrest, or is in the process of being arrested by the Riverside County sheriff’s office.
 - b) Is en route to be incarcerated by the Riverside County sheriff’s office.
 - c) Is incarcerated at a Riverside County jail.
 - d) Is at a medical facility while in custody of the Riverside County sheriff’s office.
- 7) Finds and declares that a special statute is necessary and that a general statute cannot be made applicable within the meaning of Section 16 of Article IV of the California Constitution because of the significantly higher rates of deaths in County of Riverside jails compared to the rest of the state.
- 8) Provides that, if the Commission on State Mandates determines that this bill contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs shall be made pursuant to Part 7 (commencing with Section 17500) of Division 4 of Title 2 of the Government Code.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Provides that officers of a county include a sheriff and coroner, among others. [Government Code (GOV) 24000]
- 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. (GOV 24300)
- 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. (GOV 24010)
- 4) Requires coroners to determine the manner, circumstances and cause of death in specified circumstances. [Health and Safety Code (HSC) 102850 – 102870]
- 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. (GOV 27491.56)

- 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. (GOV 27522)

FISCAL EFFECT: 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.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Author's Statement.** 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) **Background.** Each county elects or appoints a variety of officials to carry out local governance. The California Constitution requires all counties to elect, among other offices, a sheriff and a board of supervisors. For general law counties – those governed by state statutes rather than a local charter – state law specifies additional required officers, including a coroner. In contrast, the state's 15 charter counties – Alameda, Butte, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, Placer, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Shasta, and Tehama – have greater leeway to determine their own governance structure. Most charter counties specify the coroner as a county office in their charter.
- 3) **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. For example, the charter for Los Angeles County specifies that the coroner is appointed by the Board of Supervisors, while in Sacramento County, the coroner is appointed by the County Executive and subject to confirmation by the Board of Supervisors.

State law permits counties – whether general law or charter – to combine the sheriff and coroner into a single elected office, commonly referred to as the sheriff-coroner. This combined office is specified in the charters of some counties, including Butte, El Dorado, Placer, and Shasta. 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.

- 4) **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, as follows:

- a) Medical responsibilities include performing autopsies and determining causes of death for cases under the coroner’s jurisdiction.
- b) Investigative responsibilities include conducting investigations into the cause of death and identifying deceased individuals, including holding inquests when necessary.
- c) 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.

- 5) **SB 1189 of 2016.** 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 officer 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.

6) **Conflict of Interest Controversies.** There have been controversies related to a conflict of interest when sheriff-coroner offices have determined the cause of death in law enforcement-related cases.

- a) **San Joaquin County Controversy.** In December 2017, two pathologists in San Joaquin County – Dr. Bennet Omalu and Dr. Susan Parson – resigned after documenting numerous incidents of alleged interference by the sheriff in their death investigations, including changing the manner of death from "homicide" to "accident" in three cases of law enforcement-involved deaths. Since then, the county Board of Supervisors voted to create an independent medical examiner's office and voters in the county elected a new sheriff.
- b) **“Excited Delirium.”** The use of “excited delirium” as a cause of death in law enforcement-related deaths illustrates potential conflicts of interest in combined sheriff-coroner offices. Existing law [AB 360 (Gipson), Chapter 431, Statutes of 2023] defines excited delirium as “a term used to describe a person’s state of agitation, excitability, paranoia, extreme aggression, physical violence, and apparent immunity to pain that is not listed in the most current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or for which the court finds there is insufficient scientific evidence or diagnostic criteria to be recognized as a medical condition.”

Excited delirium has been attributed to sudden, unexplained deaths of individuals while in police custody. For example, this diagnosis was listed as the cause of death by Contra Costa County, which has a combined sheriff-coroner’s office, in the case of Angelo Quinto in 2020. Quinto’s family alleged that a responding officer knelt on Angelo’s neck for nearly five minutes while another officer restrained his legs, causing Angelo to lose consciousness. He later died in the hospital.

In 2021, the American Medical Association adopted a policy opposing “excited delirium” as a medical diagnosis, stating in a press release, “The new policy addresses reports that show a pattern of using the term ‘excited delirium’ and pharmacological interventions such as ketamine as justification for excessive police force, disproportionately cited in cases where Black men die in law enforcement custody.”

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

- 7) **Riverside County.** 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. 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 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.

- 8) **Legislation Last Year.** 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 goes into effect January 1, 2027
- 9) **Bill Summary.** This bill requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to separate the county offices of sheriff and coroner by July 1, 2027. This bill also requires the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to do both of the following for medicolegal death investigation services: move the services to the coroner’s office; and, require the use of an independent medical examiner model for the services. This bill also prohibits a person other than the coroner or a medical examiner from signing a death certificate or any portion of a postmortem examination.

This bill requires Riverside 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 in a centralized database that includes, but is not limited to, 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 DOJ in-custody death reporting form submitted to the DOJ for an in-custody death.

This bill 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. "In-custody death" means the death of a person who is any of the following:

- a) Detained, under arrest, or is in the process of being arrested by the Riverside County sheriff's office.
- b) Is en route to be incarcerated by the Riverside County sheriff's office.
- c) Is incarcerated at a Riverside County jail.
- d) Is at a medical facility while in custody of the Riverside County sheriff's office.

This bill is sponsored by the author.

- 10) **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.

"In California, 48 of the state's 58 counties place the functions of the coroner or medical examiner's office under the sheriff, although sheriffs are not required to have any medical background or certification to assume the duties of a coroner. California is one of only three states that allow the offices of the coroner to be combined with sheriffs despite the inherent conflicts of interest with respect to investigating causes of death at the hands of law enforcement. Counties like Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco have already separated the duties of the coroner from the sheriff. Their coroners are independent medical examiners, who are required to be licensed physicians and surgeons duly qualified as a specialist in pathology. Californians in all counties - regardless of their population size or budget - deserve access to a fair, unbiased, and transparent process.

"Riverside County has reported disproportionately high in-custody deaths for over a decade, including high in-custody death rates during Sheriff Chad Bianco's tenure. From 2011-2022,

there were 226 in-custody deaths reported in Riverside County and 216 in San Bernadino County.¹ In other words, these counties accounted for 19% of the state's in-custody deaths during that period, despite only making up around 12% of the state population.² These deaths have only continued since then, with 45 in-custody deaths recorded in Riverside County from 2021 – 2024.³

“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.”

- 11) **Arguments in Opposition.** The California State Sheriffs' Association (CSSA) writes, “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.”

- 12) **Double-Referral.** This bill is double-referred to the Public Safety Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

ACLU California Action
Drug Policy Alliance 1

Opposition

California State Sheriffs' Association
Fresno County Board of Supervisors
Riverside County Sheriff's Office
Riverside Sheriffs' Association

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