

# **2022-2023 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY**



**KERN COUNTY SHERIFF/CORONER'S OFFICE**

***21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY FACILITY FOR 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY DEMANDS***

**Release Date  
June 29, 2023**

# **KERN COUNTY SHERIFF/CORONER'S OFFICE**

## ***21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY FACILITY FOR 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY DEMANDS***

### **SUMMARY:**

The situation was grim. Three years ago the Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's Office was struggling to keep pace with the expanding demand in dealing with the deceased in Kern County. The facility was obsolete. The 2019-2020 Kern County Grand Jury was troubled by what they discovered; there was inadequate decedent storage, examination/autopsy rooms were limited, building security was a concern, and record archiving was ill-equipped in case of fire. The Coroner's Office was operating with 1970s infrastructure to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs.

This need has been acknowledged by both the Sheriff's Office and the Kern County Board of Supervisors (BOS) in various responses to the Kern County Grand Jury dating back 25 years.

The 2022-2023 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) examined the findings and recommendations in regard to the responses to the 2019-2020 Kern County Grand Jury's report.

### **PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:**

Pursuant to California Penal Code §§925 and 928, an essential function of the Grand Jury is to follow up on findings and recommendations from previous reports. The Grand Jury conducted a continuity investigation to determine if the County of Kern had implemented the findings and recommendations from the 2019-2020 Kern County Grand Jury report. If so... what progress has been made?

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with the administrators at the Kern County Sheriff's Office, reviewed the findings and recommendations of prior Grand Jury reports, and toured the future Coroner's Office to determine the status and implementations of the prior Grand Jury's recommendations.

### **2019-2020 GRAND JURY FINDINGS:**

*F1. Based on the population growth of 47%, and the increase of 59% in the Coroner's work load, a facility large enough to handle 200 decedents at any time as needed. The Sheriff's Office and BOS have supported a need for a larger facility to house the Coroner's operations, but funding has not been allocated.*

*F2. A major power outage would be catastrophic to the Coroner's facility without a dedicated backup power system. This could result in the refrigeration units containing decedents losing power if backup power is diverted to maintain Kern Medical.*

- F3. The staffing turnover of Deputy Coroners has been significant due to dealing with decedent remains, cramped working conditions and consistent overtime: all of which lead to staff burnout. Support resources are inadequate to meet these issues.*
- F4. Building security for the Coroner's facility is a continual concern. The security of high-profile decedents is an additional concern.*
- F5. In case of a fire in the warehouse, a sprinkler system would do more harm than good due to the nature of the records stored. The Coroner would benefit from a modern system for storing records.*

**2019-2020 GRAND JURY RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES:**  
***(Kern County Sheriff's Response in bold print)***

- R1. Within the next fiscal year (June 2020), the Sheriff should develop a plan for presentation to the BOS making the Coroner's facility a priority in acquiring the need of additional space. (Finding 1)*

***The Coroner's Office has been actively searching for a new facility location since 2018. A location has been selected and drawings for a new facility were developed in 2019. Efforts are in progress to investigate funding for a new facility in FY 20-21.***

- R2. Within the next fiscal year (June 2020), the Sheriff should develop a plan to provide dedicated generators to maintain the refrigeration systems in the main building and warehouse. (Finding 2)*

***The Coroner currently receives back-up power from Kern Medical during a power outage. Kern Medical conducts monthly power transfer drills, which include the Coroner Facility, to ensure the back-up system works. Additional outside generators would be obtained should Kern Medical divert power from the Coroner Facility.***

- R3. The Sheriff should develop a plan for ongoing in-service training to support probationary Coroner's staff. This training should include sustaining mental health, coping with job demands and complexities along with learning the necessary skills and techniques for competent job performance. (Finding 3)*

***Discussions are in progress about developing ongoing in-service training to support all Coroner staff. The training would include health and wellness focus, coping with job demands and complexities, and more hands-on support of new staff. Peer support and employee assistance programs are available for staff and supervisors are familiar with the services and how to access them.***

- R4. The Sheriff should increase the number of Deputy Coroners to allow for a four-day, ten-hour (4/10) work week, reduce the number of overtime hours, minimize burnout, and lessen the need for on-call coverage. (Finding 3)*

***Three Deputy Coroner vacancies were filled during 2019 and one of the three trainees are working independently. The next two trainees are expected to be cleared from the background process in the next month and will begin the 12-month training process.***

***As soon as we have eight fully trained deputy coroners, we plan to return to a four day, 10-hour (4/10) work week schedule to reduce the number of overtime hours, minimize burnout, and lessen the need for on-call coverage. Additional positions may be requested to allow double coverage on high-volume shifts so that vacations, trainings, sick leave, etc. does not place additional burden on staff who must cover a vacant shift during absences.***

- R5. *The Sheriff should immediately provide better building security and also security for staff as they enter or exit the building. In the event of high-profile decedents, extra security personnel should be available. Monitored security cameras may be an option. (Finding 4)*

***Attention to building security has been increased. A threat assessment was completed, and security improvements were recommended. Most of the security recommendations have been implemented and the remainder of improvements are currently in progress. No barriers are available to secure the Coroner Facility located within the Kern Medical complex or as a shared facility with the Kern Medical Pharmacy without hindering Kern Medical Operations and parking.***

- R6. *The Sheriff should make the security of the files and property stored in the warehouse a priority. Digitizing the files may be an option. The Sheriff should seek a grant in order to provide funding for this project. (Finding 5)*

***Fire suppression methods for the Coroner records include fire extinguishers and sprinklers located within the warehouse facility where records are kept. Kern County Fire is familiar with the warehouse/contents and have emergency phone numbers. New methods of record storage retention and fire suppression are included in the proposed new building design.***

## **DISCUSSION OF FACTS:**

The BOS adopted funding and acquired the building at 34970 McMurtrey Avenue, Bakersfield, which is approximately 107,000 square feet. This massive multi-story, single structure is currently being remodeled to accommodate not only the Coroner/Public Administrator's Office, but also the Internal Affairs Office, the Civil Division Office, and the Property Room. It is estimated that over 50% of this building will be devoted to the Coroner/Public Administrator's use. Completion is estimated to be July 2024. The County has the right of first refusal on two adjacent empty lots which gives the County flexibility for future growth.

On May 16, 2023, the Grand Jury toured the McMurtrey Avenue building and encountered an active building site. When completed, the Sheriff/Coroner's Office will have:

- Five autopsy work stations (previously two)
- Decedent storage for 350 (previously 40 to 50)

- Separate secured property room with a high density filing storage system and separate secured area to house Coroner's homicide information
- Chemical fire suppression for records system (previously water system)
- Automatic backup generator system (previously borrowed power from Kern Medical)
- Complete interior and exterior video surveillance
- Two electric vehicle charging stations

Currently, the budget allows for 14 Deputy Coroners; nine positions are filled. Of the nine, three are trainees not qualified to work cases unsupervised.

## **FINDINGS:**

- F1. In conducting this continuity investigation, the Grand Jury is pleased to report the Sheriff/Coroner's Office is in the process of implementing **all** the recommendations outlined in the 2019-2020 Grand Jury report.
- F2. The new McMurtrey Avenue location will serve the Sheriff/Coroner's Office well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- F3. The Sheriff/Coroner's Office will operate more efficiently when all vacant positions are filled.

## **COMMENTS:**

The 2022-2023 Grand Jury would like to thank the Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's staff for their hard work and dedication.

In conclusion, the Grand Jury verified that the Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's Office has implemented **all** of the report's recommendations above and beyond expectations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- R1. No later than July 1, 2024, the Kern County Board of Supervisors should assist the Sheriff in filling and retaining all positions in the Coroner's Office. (Finding 3)

## NOTES:

- The Sheriff/Coroner's Office and the Kern County Board of Supervisors should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: [www.kerncounty.com/grandjury](http://www.kerncounty.com/grandjury)
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website: [www.kerncounty.com/grandjury](http://www.kerncounty.com/grandjury)

## RESPONSE DEADLINES:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM: KERN COUNTY SHERIFF**
- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM: KERN COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

## RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c) AND 933.05 TO:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE  
KERN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT  
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212  
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON  
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY  
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600  
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
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1350 Norris Road  
Bakersfield, California 93308-2231

August 4, 2023

The Honorable J. Eric Bradshaw, Presiding Judge  
Kern County Superior Court  
1415 Truxtun Avenue  
Bakersfield, CA 93301

The 2019-2020 Grand Jury report detailed five findings with recommendations for the Coroner's Office located at 1832 Flower Street in Bakersfield. The Kern County Sheriff's Office concurred with the findings provided by the Grand Jury.

On May 16, 2023, the 2022-2023 Kern County Grand Jury returned to the Coroner's Office to examine the findings and recommendations submitted in the 2019-2020 Grand Jury's report and evaluate the progress made to date.

The Grand Jury toured the new County facility located at 34970 McMurtrey Avenue in Bakersfield. The 107,000 square-foot building was actively being remodeled to house the Coroner's Office, Public Administrator Section, Internal Affairs Section, Property Room Unit, and Civil Division of the Sheriff's Office when completed.

Upon review of the building plans and tour of the construction site, the Grand Jury observed the following:

- five autopsy workstations (previously two),
- decedent storage for 350 (previously 40-50),
- a separate records room with high-density storage system with a separate secured area to house Coroner homicide information, with chemical fire suppression for records (previously water system),
- automatic backup generator system (previously borrowed power from Kern Medical),
- complete interior and exterior video surveillance,
- two electric vehicle charging stations.

The budget allowed for fourteen (14) Deputy Coroner positions, with nine (9) positions currently filled. Of the nine positions filled, three (3) were trainees and not yet qualified to work cases unsupervised.

#### **GRAND JURY FINDINGS:**

*F1. In conducting this continuity investigation, the Grand Jury is pleased to report the Sheriff/Coroner is in the process of implementing all the recommendations outlined in the 2019-2020 Grand Jury report.*

F2. *The new McMurtrey Avenue location will serve the Sheriff/Coroner well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

F3. *The Sheriff/Coroner will operate more efficiently when all vacant positions are filled.*

**KERN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE RESPONSE TO FINDINGS:**

The Kern County Sheriff's Office concurs with the findings provided by the Grand Jury.

**GRAND JURY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

R1. *No later than July 1, 2024, the Kern County Board of Supervisors should assist the Sheriff in filling and retaining all positions in the Coroner's Office (Finding 3).*

**KERN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Kern County Sheriff's Office concurs with the recommendation provided by the Grand Jury. The Sheriff's Office will continue to explore additional recruitment and retention methods.

R1. Since the Grand Jury's visit on May 16, 2023, all three trainees are working independently and assigned to their own shift.

In addition, two additional deputy coroners were hired and waiting for the in-house 14-week Coroner training academy to begin in August 2023. If successful in their learning domains, we anticipate they will be eligible to work independently in November 2023.

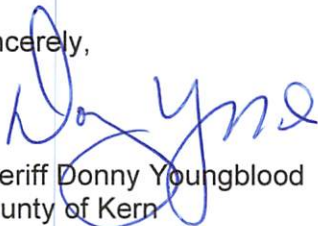
In the Fiscal Year 2023-2024 budget, one Supervising Deputy Coroner position was added. One deputy coroner was promoted into the position, creating a vacancy.

At the present time, eleven (11) of the fourteen (14) positions have been filled. The promotion of one to the supervisor position will reduce the filled positions to ten (10) of the fourteen (14) positions. There is a certified list to interview for the remaining four (4) funded positions.

During Fiscal Year 2022-2023, several selected applicants for the deputy coroner position were disqualified during the background process. This continues to hinder timely and efficient onboarding of new employees.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office sincerely thanks the Grand Jury for taking the time to visit the new home of the Coroner's Office and to evaluate the progress made since the 2019-2020 Grand Jury report. I hope this information will assist the Grand Jury in its service to the citizens of Kern County.

Sincerely,



Sheriff Donny Youngblood  
County of Kern

cc: Undersheriff Larry McCurtain  
Chief Deputy Todd Bishop  
Clerk of the Board  
Kern County Grand Jury Foreman  
CAO Chief Administrative Officer James Zervis



# BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

## SUPERVISORS

Phillip Peters.....District 1  
Zack Scrivner.....District 2  
Jeff Flores.....District 3  
David Couch.....District 4  
Leticia Perez.....District 5



KATHLEEN KRAUSE

## CLERK OF BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Kern County Administrative Center  
1115 Truxtun Avenue, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Bakersfield, California 93301  
Telephone (661) 868-3585  
TTY Relay 800-735-2929

August 22, 2023

The Honorable J. Eric Bradshaw, Presiding Judge  
Kern County Superior Court  
1415 Truxtun Avenue  
Bakersfield, CA 93301

Dear Judge Bradshaw:

Transmitted herewith is the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2022-2023 Grand Jury's Final Report titled Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's Office, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Facility for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Demands.

The Board of Supervisors appreciates the Grand Jury's review and input.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jeff Flores", is written over a faint circular stamp.

Jeff Flores, Chair  
Kern County Board of Supervisors

JF/SH/COMPL\_GJ Sheriff/Coroner A

Attachment

cc: Grand Jury

Kern County Board of Supervisors  
Response to Grand Jury Final Report  
Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's Office, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Facility for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Demands

Response to Findings F1-F3:

Kern County agrees with the Grand Jury's findings.

Response to Recommendation:

R1: *No later than July 1, 2024, the Kern County Board of Supervisors should assist the Sheriff in filling and retaining all positions in the Coroner's Office.*

The County concurs with the Sheriff's response. The Sheriff's Office will continue to explore additional recruitment and retention methods and is currently working to fill remaining vacant funded positions. The Board of Supervisors puts a high priority on public safety and continues to be supportive of increasing staffing at the Coroner's office.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
COUNTY OF KERN

**TRACKING PAGE**

AUGUST 22, 2023

TUESDAY - 2:00 P.M.

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COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

- CA-29) Proposed response to Grand Jury report titled Kern County Sheriff/Coroner's Office 21st Century Facility for 21st Century Demands (Fiscal Impact: None) - APPROVED; AUTHORIZED CHAIRMAN TO SIGN CORRESPONDENCE  
**Perez-Couch: All Ayes**