



**Chester County Office of the Coroner
Justification for a County Forensic Center**

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to identify the demographic trends, public health and safety needs, costs, and family service needs that substantiate planning for a Chester County Forensic Center. Actions requested from the Commissioners in response to this information are stated in Appendix B.

- By 2043 (25 years), there will be approximately 8,246 deaths per year in Chester County, more than twice the current number.
- By 2043, the number of medicolegal death investigations and autopsies will more than double to an estimated 1264 jurisdictional investigations and 467 autopsies annually.
- Any pandemic, mass fatality incident, or other disaster will rapidly overwhelm the current resources of the Chester County Coroner's Office (CCCO), according to a June 2018 Mass Fatality Incident exercise conducted with Department of Emergency Services.
- The CCCO shares morgue space in 4 hospitals and has access to an autopsy room in 2 hospitals. Continued availability of these facilities is at risk due to increased utilization by the hospitals themselves and by lack of a written agreement with all but one hospital.
- The hospital morgues and autopsy facilities date to the mid-20th century or earlier and have major deficiencies which will preclude accreditation and potentially impact criminal justice cases.
- No hospital facility has a family viewing area or an observation area (for law enforcement or educational purposes).
- Any event with more than 4 or 5 fatalities will result in great expense to Chester County due to the need to reimburse other jurisdictions for assistance and resources.
- CCCO cannot guarantee security of the chain of evidence in homicides or other sensitive cases due to lack of control over bodies in the hospital facilities.
- Conditions in the hospital autopsy rooms are a safety hazard to Chester County personnel and others (e.g. law enforcement attendees).
- The CCCO cannot guarantee fulfillment of the service expectations of Chester County families with the current facilities.
- A forensic facility with administrative offices, morgue, and autopsy suite in one central location will decrease ongoing costs for mileage, morgue rental, transport of bodies between and out of county, and overtime.

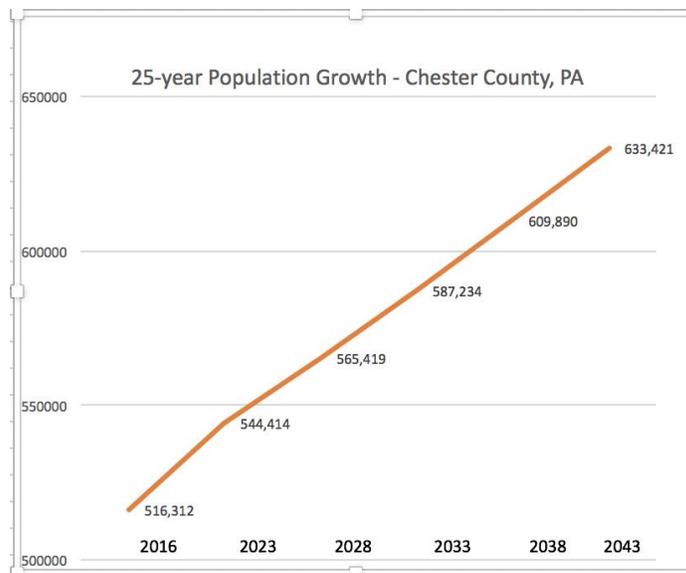
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Demographic Trends

Population Estimates

Chester County's population was 516,312 in 2016 and is expected to continue growing significantly over the next 30 years (Source: Chester County Planning Commission). Using an annual growth rate of 0.76% (PA State Data Center), in 25 years the estimated total population of Chester County will be 633,421 people.



The population age 65 and older is growing much faster than the general population, with a 20% increase since 2011 (Chester Co Planning Commission). In 2016, 79,377 people, or about 15% of the total population, were 65 or older. Using an average annual growth rate of 3.3% for this age group, the number of older Chester County residents is estimated to be 191,045 in 25 years, or about 30% of the population.

Mortality Estimates

There is an absence of information about death rates and causes of death in the Chester County Planning Commission's statistics. The following information was drawn from state and national mortality statistics and from available information in the Chester County Coroner's Office (CCCO) annual reports.

There will be an increasing number of deaths in the County over the next 25 years due to projected increase in total population and especially the increase in the number and percentage of older residents. In 2016, 3885 people died in Chester County for an overall mortality rate of 0.7%; 3,098 of those decedents were 65 years or older (state vital statistics).

Based on the estimated population distribution and if the mortality rates remain the same for those under and over 65 years, there will be approximately **8,246 deaths in 2043 in Chester County**, for a mortality rate of 1.3%. This is more than **twice the current number of deaths**. This estimate excludes the possibility of any pandemic or other disaster over the coming 25 years.

Impact on Coroner's Office

What will be the impact on the Chester County Coroner's Office? In 2016, the CCCO was contacted in approximately 89% of all deaths. The majority of investigations were administrative (e.g. review and approval of cremation permits). A total of 593 cases required more complete investigation. Therefore approximately 15% of all deaths required extensive resources from the CCCO in 2016. Autopsies were performed in 220 or 37% of the more intensely investigated cases. Assuming similar percentages over the coming 25 years, the number of in-depth **medicolegal death investigations and autopsies will more than double by 2043** to an estimated 1264 investigations and 467 autopsies.

Resources

Overview

The CCCO shares morgue space in 4 hospitals and an autopsy room in 2 hospitals in Chester County. **Continued availability of these facilities is at risk.** In any case, **the facilities do not meet the minimum required standards for accreditation** (See Appendix A).

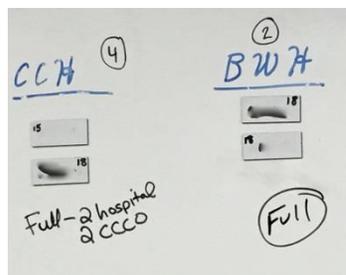
The CCCO is meeting current needs only with constant juggling of both human and facility resources. A recent Mass Fatality Incident exercise and the November 2017 Barclay Home fire demonstrated that **the County cannot manage more than 3-4 fatalities at one time with the current resources.** Currently the CCCO handles an average of 3 cases per day.

Morgue

The CCCO has a Memorandum of Understanding in place with only one hospital, the Chester County Hospital (CCH). CCH is expanding, but does not plan to add any morgue or autopsy facilities. It can be anticipated, therefore, that CCH will have an increasing need for the morgue spaces at their facility to accommodate hospital deaths.

The other hospitals in Chester County have not agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding with the CCCO. While awaiting a final response from these hospitals, the morgue (and autopsy space) at these facilities continues to be used by the CCCO.

When one or more of the hospital morgues is full, bodies must be moved to another facility or funeral home arrangements must be expedited. The CCCO keeps track of morgue space on a whiteboard, as shown in the image below (June 2018). (Decedent names obscured for privacy.)



The hospital morgues all have at least the following **major deficiencies which would preclude accreditation and/or impact criminal justice cases:**

- Lack of control over bodies (hospital personnel, funeral home personnel have access to the space even when homicide victims are stored)
- No freezer for decomposed bodies (these are not rare, especially in hotter weather; hospitals do not want insect-infested or malodorous bodies in their facility)
- No isolation space for contaminated, infected, or otherwise hazardous bodies (Example: suicide by cyanide ingestion – decedent had to be transported to isolation space in Lancaster County)

Autopsy Facilities

CCCO uses a single autopsy room at the Chester County Hospital and another at the Brandywine Hospital (BWH). Both hospitals are over 100 years old and the autopsy space appears to have had no updating since the mid-20th century. The CCCO will not pass an accreditation audit due to the deficiencies of these autopsy facilities including:

- Only one autopsy “station” (CCCO workload justifies 3-4 stations)
- Lack of adequate ventilation (both autopsy attendees and hospital air at risk)
- Lack of mandatory safety equipment including emergency shower and eyewash station
- Lack of body scale (Example: in a recent investigation of a potential elder abuse case, documenting an accurate weight required special arrangements with hospital staff).
- Lack of cleanliness (Cleaning of these spaces done by the hospitals is cursory at best.) *(Addendum 3-4-2019: The CCCO does not wish to imply that we do not appreciate services provided by the hospitals - we realize these are donations of time and resources that should be the responsibility of the County)*

Family Viewing Area

None is available. The CCCO frequently turns down requests from next of kin to view their loved one. This causes distress and sometimes anger on the part of Chester County families.

Observation Area

None is available. Law enforcement personnel often attend autopsies for cases they may be prosecuting. In doing so they are exposed to hazardous conditions. Modern facilities have protected observation bays with video viewing.

Costs

A forensic facility with administrative offices, morgue, and autopsy suite in one centralized location will decrease ongoing and future costs for

- Mileage (most staff need to use personal vehicles)
- Transport of bodies to and between hospitals
- Overtime (more time is required to complete investigations, schedule, and attend autopsies when they are all over the County)
- Storage of decomposed or hazardous bodies in morgues in other counties.
- Mass fatality incidents or any event with more than 4 or 5 fatalities
 - Mutual aid agreements require the County to pay for use of resources outside the County
- Outsourcing of all autopsies and morgue storage outside the County when hospital facilities are no longer available or fail to meet workplace safety standards

Safety and Security

The safety risks to staff and observers were detailed in the Resources section.

Security of bodies under the jurisdiction of the CCCO is of great concern. In criminal or civil cases, the bodies and personal property with the bodies is evidence. Body bags are secured only with an easily breakable plastic tag. Hospital and funeral home personnel have access to the morgue and to bodies in the jurisdiction of the CCCO. Therefore, the **CCCO cannot guarantee security of the chain of evidence in homicides.**

Service to Chester County Families

Chester County families and friends of decedents should be able to expect the following during a Coroner's investigation where the body is taken into the care of the CCCO:

- An opportunity to view the decedent(s) as soon as possible, if desired. This is especially critical to parents of infants and children who die suddenly and unexpectedly.
- Storage of the decedent's body in a secure, temperature-monitored environment
- Autopsies will be performed in a modern, safe, and clean autopsy suite

With the current facilities, the CCCO cannot guarantee fulfillment of any of these expectations of families.

References

1. https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/HealthStatistics/VitalStatistics/DeathStatistics/Documents/Death_Projections.aspx
2. <https://pasdc.hbg.psu.edu/>
3. <http://www.Chesco.org/coroner>
4. <http://www.chesco.org/177/Planning-Commission>

Appendix A

Standards for Accreditation

[Intl Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME)]

Subsection: Morgue and Autopsy Facility

The Chester County Coroner's Office is a highly professional Coroner office with regard to all other areas evaluated for accreditation by the IACME. However, the lack of morgue and autopsy facilities that meet today's basic standards will likely result in failure of accreditation in the early 2019 audit unless a plan is in place to address the deficiencies - in which case a provisional accreditation may be obtained. The U.S. Department of Justice has recommended accreditation of coroner/medical examiner offices by 2020 and it is likely this will be mandated by state or federal agencies at some point in the future.

The morgue and autopsy facilities available to the Chester County Coroner's Office fail to meet the following standards:

Body Receiving Area

1. All surface areas, floors, and walls in the body receiving area shall be clean.
2. Body scales shall be available and operate.
3. Body stretchers and carts shall be maintained and in good working condition (needs definition).

Refrigeration

1. The refrigerated storage space shall be sufficient to maintain a normal caseload.
2. The temperature gauges shall be operable and checked regularly by staff
3. Temperatures shall be recorded/logged on a schedule by Coroner staff.
4. Separate refrigerated storage should be available for decomposed bodies.

Autopsy Facility

1. Staff changing areas should be provided with showers for both male and female employees.
2. First aid kits, safety showers, and eyewashes shall be available and in good working order.
3. Ventilation system shall adequately control odors.
4. The autopsy area shall be able to accommodate normal and peak case load.

Appendix B

Requested Commissioner Actions for 2019

1. Visit one or both hospital facilities currently in use by the Chester County Coroner's Office prior to budget decisions for 2019.
2. Understand and recognize the importance of the medicolegal death investigation function to the County's public health and safety as well as criminal justice system.
3. Recognize that the current morgue and autopsy facilities are sub-standard, a safety hazard to employees, disrespectful to the residents of Chester County, and stretched to their limit.
4. Approve Facilities Department, in consultation with the Chester County Coroner's Office, to obtain a professional evaluation of land and/or building options in Chester County for building or retrofitting a one-location Coroner's Forensic Center. This will include identification of specific locations and buildings, feasibility (zoning, municipality approval), costs, and timing for the project.
5. Approve Facilities Department, in consultation with the Chester County Coroner's Office, to obtain a forensic center architectural plan from a firm with expertise in designing forensic facilities - this plan will include a needs assessment and proposed architectural design, including necessary engineering elements, and a cost estimate.
6. Support establishment of a Forensic Center Advisory Board under the leadership of the Chester County Coroner - to include stakeholders from the community (private, not-for-profits, municipal and county government) and at least one forensic pathologist not under contract with Chester County.
7. Approve the Chester County Coroner's Office to contract with someone to provide us with grant application expertise so we can identify and apply for state and federal grants to support this project - or assign resources within Chester County government to this function.