

Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office Project Abstract

The Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office came into existence December 9, 2019, with a planned capacity of approximately 350 postmortem examinations per year. However, due to better reporting and investigations, the Medical Examiner's Office will be doing between 660 and 700 cases per year. Therefore, it needs additional autopsy stations and autopsy tables in order to handle the increased post mortem workload in a timely fashion. The requested funds will be used to purchase, deliver, and install two additional autopsy workstations and ten additional rolling autopsy tables. These additional autopsy stations and tables will be used to transport decedents and perform post mortem examinations in a much more timely fashion, allowing for more efficient use of the forensic pathologist and the morgue personnel's time. We are also requesting funds to purchase a pallet lift for assisting in the movement of decedents on and off storage shelving to free up additional autopsy tables for improved timeliness of performing post mortem examinations. The Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office will be able to increase the timeliness of services, and prevent and reduce backlogs by performing more examinations per day as well as more examinations per physician per day to handle the significantly increased workload we are experiencing.

Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office Program Narrative

Description of the Issue

Fort Bend County Commissioners Court created the Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office in 2019 and began operations on December 9, 2019. The Medical Examiner's Office took over all death investigation duties and functions for Fort Bend County, which the Justices of the Peace had previously performed for the entire history of the county. In preparation for the creation of the Medical Examiner's Office and construction of its facilities, Fort Bend County collected five years of death investigation data from all of the Justices of the Peace.

Based on that data, the facility was designed to accommodate 350 cases per year. It was built with room for future expansion to accommodate Fort Bend County's growing population as well as decedents sent from geographically proximate counties for forensic examinations. These data reflected decedents that were reported to the Justices of the Peace, who then either certified the deaths or sent them to a third party provider for post mortem examination.

However, within 30 days of beginning death investigation operations, the Medical Examiner's Office found that for decades, the police agencies in Fort Bend County had not been reporting all the deaths to the Justices of the Peace. In 2018, the police agencies reported approximately 900 deaths to the Justices of the Peace. Based on Fort Bend County's population and the deaths reported to other Texas medical examiner jurisdictions, we predict that Fort Bend County should have approximately 3,000 cases annually reported to the Justices of the Peace (and subsequently the Medical Examiner's Office), with between 600 and 800 annual forensic examinations in the office. Based on reporting from December 2019 through February 2020, we expect to receive approximately 2,000 death reports this year and to examine 660-700 bodies. As reporting from

the police agencies continues to improve, we predict 3,000 deaths annually and 800 forensic examinations annually. For this reason, the Medical Examiner Office is in serious need of 2 additional autopsy stations and 10 additional rolling autopsy/exam tables.

The Medical Examiner's Office has two large body coolers that can accommodate approximately 50 decedents on autopsy tables. We currently have 18 autopsy/exam tables. Due to the increased number of death investigations, all tables have been consistently occupied by decedents and we had to add shelving to accommodate the increased numbers of decedents. We can accommodate approximately 68 adult decedents. However, moving decedents onto and off the higher and lower shelves is difficult and presents a risk to the morgue technicians lifting the bodies. For this reason, we are requesting a manual pallet lift to move decedents to facilitate timeliness and ease of autopsies and examinations.

The quality of death investigation in Fort Bend County has significantly improved starting in December 2019 since Fort Bend County converted to a full medical examiner jurisdiction from the lay death investigative Justice of the Peace system. In addition, two geographically close counties without their own medical examiners have contracted with Fort Bend County to provide forensic pathology and death investigation services. Having the additional capacity to handle more decedents in the Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office will consequently improve timeliness and quality of death investigations beyond the borders of Fort Bend County into the surrounding region, serving a population of at least 874,737 people (July 1, 2019, *U.S. Census Bureau*). Fort Bend County alone is expected to exceed one million residents by 2022 (2017, *University of Houston Hobby School of Public Affairs*), which further emphasizes the importance of adequate laboratory equipment.

Project Design and Implementation

The Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office was outfitted with equipment from Mortech Manufacturing for the autopsy stations and the rolling autopsy tables that lock into place with them. We will need to add two more stations and ten additional rolling autopsy tables from the same manufacturer so that the equipment we already have can be used in all the autopsy stations. The equipment will be built to the current specifications of the autopsy stations in the Medical Examiner's Office, delivered and installed for use. The pallet lift will be put to immediate use in the body coolers.

Capabilities and Implementation

The Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office employs two full-time and four part-time forensic pathologists who are all certified in forensic pathology by the American Board of Pathology. It also employs four highly trained and skilled morgue technicians. All resumes and curricula vitae are attached. The additional autopsy stations, autopsy/exam tables, and pallet lift are all equipment that the pathologists and morgue techs are familiar and will be able to put to use immediately.

Impact and Data Collection

The impact of this additional equipment will be that decedents will be able to be transported through the examination and autopsy process more efficiently and thusly improving the timeliness and quality of death investigations from a population area of approximately 875,000. Decedents

will be able to be efficiently placed on the shelving, freeing up autopsy tables for subsequent forensic examinations. We will be able to measure the effect of this additional equipment by tracking the date the decedent arrived at the Medical Examiner's Office and the date to perform the postmortem examination and tabulating the improvement in timeliness of the examinations. We anticipate a 15%-20% improvement in the timeliness of performing these examinations, which will correspond to a similar percentage reduction in backlogs.