County of Los Angeles
CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
713 KENNETH HAHN HALL OF ADMINISTRATION • LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90012
(213) 974-1101
http://cao.co.la.ca.us

DAVID E. JANSSEN
Chief Administrative Officer

Board of Supervisors
GLORIA MOLINA
First District

YVONNE B. BURKE
Second District

ZEV YAROSLAVSKY
Third District

DON KNABE
Fourth District

MICHAEL D. ANTONOVICH
Fifth District

June 26, 2006

To: Mayor Michael D. Antonovich
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Supervisor Don Knabe

From: David E. Janssen
Chief Administrative Officer

Anthony T. Hernandez
Director, Department of Coroner

Lakshmanan Sathyavagiswaran, M.D.
Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner

REPORT ON DEPARTMENT OF THE CORONER MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND OVERCAPACITY OF CRYPT SPACE (AGENDA OF JUNE 26, 2006 BUDGET DELIBERATIONS)

On May 23, 2006, in response to issues revolving around the processing and storage of decedent bodies by the Coroner, your Board directed the Chief Administrative Office and Coroner to:

- Review the Coroner's current management practices for the identification, storage, and cremation of decedent bodies; and

- Determine the adequacy of existing storage space for decedent bodies at the Coroner's current facility.

This review has been completed and the results indicate that the number of decedent bodies currently being processed and stored by the Coroner exceeds the facility's capacity by 26.2%. The overcrowding at the facility is attributable to the time consuming nature of the Coroner's identity investigation process, insufficient investigative staffing, insufficient cremation capacity, and the inadequacy of the existing

storage space to accommodate unanticipated increases in decedents. In order to address these issues, we are recommending the:

- Addition of investigative, clerical support, and forensic attendant staff to reduce the time necessary to identify and process decedent bodies and increase overall throughput in the identification process;

- Implementation of as-needed cremation service agreements with three outside crematoriums to eliminate the need to store bodies awaiting cremation;

- Construction of a new, 4,000 to 5,000 square foot crypt building to replace the existing crypt space and allow the Coroner to accommodate unanticipated increases in decedent bodies;

- Refurbishment and reconfiguration of the Coroner's existing buildings to health and safety and building system issues.

Implementation of these recommendations will immediately address the current storage issue, improve throughput in the identification and investigation process, reduce the amount of time a body requires storage, and address the Coroner's capital needs.

Funding for the addition of investigative, clerical, and forensic staff and the as-needed cremation service agreements is included in the CAO's Final Changes to the Proposed 2006-07 Budget. Recommendations for the proposed crypt building and the refurbishment and reconfiguration of the Coroner's existing buildings will be presented to your Board in August 2006.

Analysis of Decedent Overcrowding

Our study entailed an analysis of historical weekly decedent counts since January 2004, a review of statutory requirements that impact decedent retention, and an assessment of the Coroner's decedent management process. Our study concluded that insufficient staffing in the Coroner's investigation/identification unit and a lack of cremation resources were the primary reasons for the overcrowding at the Coroner's facility. We found little connection between the detention requirements under current statutes and the overcrowded conditions.

The current facility provides 3,900 square feet of refrigerated crypt space that will retain up to 325 bodies. The Coroner's records indicated average decedent counts of 316 in 2004, 338 in 2005, and 414 for the period of January 2006 through May 2006. For baseline purposes, a seven day period beginning on May 21, 2006 was utilized, with a

decedent count of 410 bodies. Our analysis determined that 118 bodies, or 28.8%, were pending identification or identification of the next of kin. An additional 136 bodies, or 33.2%, were awaiting cremation. The remaining 156 bodies, or 38.0%, were retained pending a response from next of kin regarding final disposition of the decedent.

Statutory Requirements

State statutes have established mandates upon coroners for locating a decedent's next of kin and a minimum retention period following notification of the next of kin. Pursuant to Government Code Section 27471, if the Coroner takes possession of a decedent's body, the Coroner must make a reasonable, yet diligent attempt to locate the decedent's next of kin. Once the coroner establishes and notifies the decedent's next of kin, the Coroner is required under Health and Safety Code Section 7104.1 to retain the decedent's body for 30 days if the next of kin fails to act. Upon expiration of the 30 day holding period, the Coroner may process and release the bodies for cremation.

Current Decedent Management Process

The Coroner's current procedures for the investigation of a decedent's identity and the identity and location of a decedent's next of kin are extremely diligent and can be exhaustive and time-consuming. The total amount of time dedicated to this process can range from one to seven months, based on current Coroner staffing levels, and elevates the amount of time a decedent's body must be retained.

The amount of time committed to investigating the identity of an unknown decedent can range from 15 to 120 days. Identification can include a review of the site where the decedent was found, a review of any physical evidence, fingerprint and DNA analysis, and other factors. Upon establishment of a decedent's identity, identification of the decedent's next of kin can require an additional 15 to 90 days.

Coroner staff review all available sources of information including, but not limited to, the decedent's personal documents, insurance policies, military service records, employment records, utility bills, witnesses, friends, co-workers, law enforcement records, etc. This search process is not terminated until the next of kin is located or all possible leads have been exhausted.

Upon notification of the next of kin, or the conclusion of an exhaustive search, the statutorily required 30 day holding period commences. At its conclusion, if the next of kin has not retrieved the decedent's body, the Coroner may release the body for cremation.

The lack of sufficient crematory resources, however, has required the Coroner to retain bodies for 30 to 60 days after they have been released for cremation. The Coroner has traditionally utilized the County Crematory, which is operated by the LAC+USC Medical Center. The County Crematory has the capacity to cremate six decedents per day. The County Crematory, however, is utilized by hospitals and mortuaries throughout the County and the capacity available to the Coroner is limited. The lack of crematory resources has resulted in the retention of bodies for an additional 30 to 60 days, which equated to 136 bodies, or 33.0%, of the baseline study group.

Based on our review, 254 or 62.0% of the bodies at the Coroner's facility were stored pending the completion of decedent identification and next of kin identification investigations or awaiting release for cremation. A decrease in the time necessary to complete the identification process and to transfer bodies to a crematory other than the County Crematory would eliminate the overcrowded condition of the facility.

Proposed Actions

In order to decrease the number of decedent bodies at the Coroner's facility, the Coroner has executed three cremation service agreements, which will alleviate any backlog in decedent bodies awaiting cremation. The Coroner expects the current backlog of 136 bodies will be eliminated by the end of July 2006, and with it, the current overcrowded condition.

To maintain pace with the increasing number of cases being handled by the Coroner, we are recommending the addition of investigative and support staff. Currently, the Coroner's Identification/Notification Unit consists of two investigators, a senior clerk, and two part-time student workers. The additional staff we are recommending consists of two investigators, two clerical support items, two forensic attendant items, and a contract analyst. It is anticipated that the additional staffing will enable the Coroner to significantly decrease the amount of time necessary to complete the investigation and identification process and better absorb unanticipated upswings in caseloads.

The additional staff is estimated to cost approximately $520,000 in 2006-07. Services and supplies, an additional transport van, and funding for the three crematory services agreements will add $125,000 for a total funding requirement in 2006-07 of $645,000. Funding in this amount has been included for the Coroner's budget in the CAO's Final Changes to the Proposed 2006-07 Budget.

Capital Improvements

The current Coroner's facility was constructed in 1970 and consists of 39,250 square feet that houses autopsy and forensic laboratory operations. The existing facility fails to provide sufficient space for autopsy and laboratory operations, which has compromised the ability to effectively separate biologically hazardous areas from non-hazardous areas and has impaired the processing and storage of decedents. Further, the facility's heating, ventilating, air-conditioning, electrical, and other building systems have experienced significant deterioration.

Reconfiguration and Refurbishment of Existing Biological Building

In July 2003, the CAO directed a study of methods to address these issues and improve the functionality and circulation of the biological areas. This review produced a plan that would:

- Relocate the Coroner's public administrative service functions to the 18,000 square foot Old Administration Building, located immediately to the north of the existing facility to increase space in the existing biological building for evidence processing, storage, and laboratory functions;

- Reconfigure existing and newly freed space to properly separate hazardous and non-hazardous areas and to create adequate transitional areas between them;

- Allow for the expansion of space dedicated to DNA, histology, and toxicology activities; and

- Provide space for the addition of two specialty autopsy suites, viewing rooms, and locker rooms for male and female employees.

The entire relocation, reconfiguration, and refurbishment plan was estimated to cost $19.5 million. The relocation of administrative staff to the Old Administration Building was initiated by the CAO and is expected to be completed August 2006. The relocation represents a necessary prerequisite for the overall reconfiguration and refurbishment plan to succeed.

Proposed Crypt Building

This plan, however, focused solely on employee safety and operational issues. It does not address any decedent storage issues. After discussions with the Coroner and the Department of Public Works, we have concluded that the construction of a new 4,500

square foot crypt building would, combined with the addition of staffing and cremation agreements, provide the best long-term solution to the Coroner's storage issues.

We will return to your Board with the Department of Public Works in August 2006 with recommendations to proceed with the design of the reconfiguration and refurbishment of the existing biological building. We will now expand scope of the recommended consultant agreements to include the programming and design the proposed crypt building.

The Capital Projects/Refurbishments Budget currently appropriates $19.5 million for the reconfiguration and refurbishment project. An additional $10.0 million is being recommended as part of the CAO's Final Changes to the Proposed 2006-07 Budget to fund cost escalation on the reconfiguration and refurbishment project and design and construction of the crypt building.

DEJ:JSE
DJT:DKM

c: Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
County Counsel