

Letter from the Coroner

As I was preparing this report of my fourth and final year as Chester County Coroner, it struck me how little of the day to day experience of the office can be communicated by statistics. Anyone who's had the privilege of working in the Chester County Coroner's Office knows that every day and night is different and unpredictable. We like to say "this job isn't for everyone" and are proud that we have the skills and temperament to do it professionally and compassionately, to the benefit of every community and every person in Chester County.

We are perhaps the only County row office that works directly with and for people in all walks of life, from the least to the most fortunate, during the most stressful of times. We are proud of our status as an independent agency charged by state law with determining the truth about someone's death, regardless of whether they died homeless, in prison, on a highway, in a nursing home, or in a mansion.

During this second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Coroner's Office dealt with two surges, the end of the 2020-2021 winter surge, and the beginning of the 2021-2022 winter surge. New variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, inadequate or waning vaccination immunity, and other factors translated into continued high death rates from COVID-19 and its complications.

The year 2021 also saw a resurgence of deaths due to substance abuse, suicide, accidents, and sudden natural deaths. I believe many of these are related in part to anxiety, depression, and lack of access to preventive and behavioral health services during the pandemic.


Data remained an important public service of our office in 2021. Our website <https://chesco.org/209/Coroner> continued to provide summarized data on a monthly basis for both COVID-19 and all other kinds of deaths. The Coroner's Office Facebook page (@ChesCoCoroner) also continued to provide important information to the Chester County community. Finally, press releases kept the public informed about COVID-19, deaths in prison, deaths due to weather conditions, and other high-profile cases.

A continued disappointment to this Coroner was the Chester County Commissioners' lack of action concerning the longstanding and well-documented infrastructure needs of the Coroner's Office. Indeed, Chester County Coroners have been advocating for this for several decades now. As of the end of 2021, no concrete action had been taken on proposals or needs assessment

performed during my four years in office. Funds for a coroner forensic facility were included in the 2022 budget but appear to be intended for more "evaluation."* A related unmet need is for at least one full-time forensic pathologist and additional autopsy technicians. It is my hope that our County will one day recognize the key role the Coroner's Office plays in the public health, public safety, and criminal justice systems and take real action to ensure the Coroner's Office has the resources needed to meet national accreditation standards.

The Coroner's Office continued its biennial practice of organizing a ceremony for our unclaimed veterans at Washington Crossing National Cemetery. On October 28, 2021, nine veterans were laid to rest in a moving ceremony attended by our staff and many veterans' groups. We also had the honor of accompanying the body of Montgomery County Firefighter Tom Royds after his tragic Line of Duty death on July 24, 2021.

As a final note, I would like to offer a few thank yous. It has been an honor to work with the many emergency responders and law enforcement agencies that protect and care for Chester County. I also would like to recognize the health care workers who have taken our calls at all hours and provided us with information that has helped determine the cause and manner of many sudden deaths. Finally, the leadership of the Chester County Medical Society in facilitating communication and preparedness in the medical community has been invaluable during the pandemic and the imminent closure of two of Chester County's hospitals.



Christina VandePol, M.D., F-ABMDI

Coroner of the County of Chester, PA (2018-2021)

*In May 2022, a County spokesperson provided the following update: "The County has approved a budget of \$14.9 million over three years for the new Coroner's Office facility, and locations for the new premises are currently being evaluated. The County Coroner is apprised of current location options and County facilities staff will continue to work with her office as the project moves forward."