

2017

# Coroner's Office Annual Report



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Columbia County Coroner

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#### Introduction

The objective of this report is to provide members of the local community and government officials with a summary regarding the deaths investigated by the Columbia County Coroner's Office between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2016.

This report will provide an overview that includes the following: Number of death investigation conducted, Causes of Death, and types of Manner of Death. Additional information such as numbers of death investigations per municipality will also be reported.

This report will also provide a summary of other activities such as Community Outreach and Continuing Education that members of the Coroner's Office participated in during 2016.

One of the primary goals of this report to educate the general public on the Causes and Manners of Death that occur within Columbia County in an attempt to raise awareness and prevent future death and illness.

#### Overview

In 2016 the Columbia County Coroner's Office responded to **150 Death Investigation Requests** in conjunction with County Law Enforcement and healthcare providers. A "death investigation" is defined as a death where the Coroner's office must respond and investigate the Cause and Manner of Death per PA Statute. Cause of death is the reason listed on the PA Vital Statistics death certificate for the death such as Pneumonia, Heart Attack, Respiratory Failure, Blunt Force Trauma etc. Manner of death is one of six as listed on the PA Vital Statistics Death certificate which are: Natural, Accidental, Suicide, Homicide, Pending Investigation, and Undetermined.

The Coroner's office also **authorized 229 cremations in Columbia County**. By law a body that is to be cremated must first be approved by the Coroner's Office where the death occurred. Normally a cremation investigation involves a phone correspondence with a funeral director regarding, cause, manner and location of death as reported by the funeral director. Verbal authorization is then given for the cremation followed by a written permit faxed or emailed to the funeral home. A fee of \$30.00 is charged per cremation in most cases but can be waived in cases of indigent persons or other circumstances deemed appropriate by the Coroner.

The Coroner's Office also received **51 hospital referrals** from the Geisinger Bloomsburg Hospital and Berwick Hospital Center both located within the county. By law when any person who dies within 24 hours of admission to a hospital, the death must be reported to the County Coroner for review. While some of these case do require a full investigation many are released after consultation with the Family or Hospital physician who signs the death certificate when the Manner of Death is Natural Causes.

# **Staffing Overview**

The Coroner's Office staffing at the beginning of 2016 consisted of 1 PT Elected Salaried Coroner, 1 PT Chief Deputy Coroner, 3 PT Deputy Coroners, 2 Reserve Deputy Coroners who are used on an Emergency basis only, and one PT Secretary/Deputy Coroner.

All deputy coroners are paid on a per call basis and the Secretary is paid hourly for a maximum of 12 hours a month. An additional deputy coroner was retained in 2016 and trained.

At the end of 2016 two deputy coroners resigned from active status with the office. An additional deputy was also appointed at the beginning of 2017 and is being trained and the office is seeking one additional deputy coroner to train and add to it's staffing roster in 2017.

# Causes of Death in 2016

Leading Causes of death in Columbia County in 2016 included:

Cardiovascular Disease/Pulmonary Diseases	82
Mixed Substance Toxicity	22
Gunshot Wounds	10

# **Manner of Deaths**:

The following provides a break down on the Manner of Death as listed on the final PA Vital Records

Death Certificate by the Coroner's Office:

Natural Causes	105
Accidental	22
Suicide	15
Homicide	4
Pending Investigation	1
Undetermined	1
Bone Discovery (Found to be Animal)	1
Assist to Lycoming County Coroner	1

### **Homicide Deaths**

Of the 4 deaths rules as Homicides, 3 were drug death related incidents in Scott Township, Hemlock Township, and the Town of Bloomsburg. The 4<sup>th</sup> Homicide was a result of a Domestic Violence incident in Benton Township in June of 2016 in which the actor subsequently committed suicide.

### <u>Suicides</u>

There were 15 suicides in Columbia County in 2016. The ages of the victims were from their early 20s through 79 years old. Causes of death in the suicide victims included: Gunshot wounds, 3 hangings, and a drowning. There were no reported cases of teen suicide in Columbia County in 2016.

#### **Accidental Deaths**

There were 22 accidental deaths within the county in 2016. Most of these deaths were caused by Mixed Substance Toxicity secondary to the current drug crisis. There were 4 traffic related fatalities in Columbia County in 2016. 3 occurred on public highways and the 4<sup>th</sup> was an ATV incident on private property.

# Infant Child Deaths/Child Death Review

There were a total of **5 Child or Infant deaths** in Columbia County during 2016. Of those 4, 2 were determined to be Sudden Unexplained Infant Death, one was from Natural Causes due to congenital issues, one an Amish child from Natural causes not referred to this office, and the 5<sup>th</sup> death remains under investigation and the Cause of death has not been determined. 1 of the deaths is believed to be related to an unsafe sleeping situation.

A Child Death review team will be assembled by the Coroner in 2017 to review these 5 deaths along with 1 other child death of a Columbia County resident. Child Death review teams consist of Coroners, Law Enforcement, Child Services, Healthcare, and other community partners in reviewing deaths of children who reside within the county and developing recommendation for prevention of future similar incidents.

# **Drug Related Deaths**

There were 22 drug related fatalities in Columbia County, 3 of those deaths were ruled as Homicides, 2 were ruled as a Manner of Death as Suicide, 16 were ruled as Accidental, and one was ruled as Undetermined for Manner of Death.

This represents an increase from 16 drug related deaths in 2015, and 8 in 2014. The rise in drug related deaths mirror the trends seen across both the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the United States. A separate PA Coroner's Association drug death report provides additional information and will again be published for 2016 and the 2015 report has been disseminated by the Coroner's Office as the 2016 report will once it becomes available.

The Coroner has been proactive in working with local media outlets to educate the public about the dangers of drug use and the rise in drug related deaths. The coroner has also engaged in dialogue and conducted presentations for several local civic groups regarding the topic of drug deaths.

# **Gun Related Fatalities**

Of the 10 related firearm fatalities in Columbia County to Manner of Death was as follows:

- Homicide 1
- Suicide 8
- Accidental 1

# **Death Investigations by Municipality**

Municpality	# of Deaths Invest
Benton Borough	3
Benton Township	3
Berwick	25
Berwick	3
Berwick Boro	2
Berwick borough	2
Bloomsburg	8
Bloomsburg	14
Bloomsburg Hospita	1
Bloomsburg/Scott T	v 1
Briar Creek Boro	2
Briar Creek Twp	8
Catawissa Boro	3
Conyngham Twp	2 2
Fishing Creek	2
Greenwood	1
Greenwood Townsh	i 1
Greenwood/Monto	J 1
Hemlock Twp	3
Jackson Twp	3
Locust Township	4
Madison Twp	2
Main Township	3
Mifflin Township	10
Millville Borough	2
Montour Twp	5
Mount Pleasant Twp	1
Mt Pleasant	2
Mt. Pleasant	1
North Centre	5
Orange Twp	3
Orangeville Borougl	1 1
Pine Twp	3
Roaring Creek	2
Scott Twp	12
South Centre	3
Sugarloaf Twp	3
<b>Grand Total</b>	150

Note: Hospital Deaths are normally credited to the Municipality where the Hospital is located in most cases.

# Caseload Distribution by Coroner/Deputy Coroner for 2016

The following represents the number of deaths investigated by the Coroner and each Deputy in 2016. On cases with 2 names it means multiple Coroners were involved in the investigation. During each investigation the investigating Deputy is required to consult with the Coroner or the Chief Deputy Coroner or Coroner on Call to review their findings. The Coroner also reviews all cases either during or after the investigation is concluded in the event that the Coroner is unavailable.

Coroner/Dept	<b>Total Cases</b>
Bangs	7
Bangs	1
Bangs/Reese	1
Bangs/Taylor	1
Beyer	32
Beyer/Reese	5
Bunnell	1
Bunnell/Reese	1
Reese	46
Reese/Bangs	2
Reese/Taylor	2
Statskey	3
Statskey/Beyer	1
Statskey/Reese	1
Taylor	45
Taylor/Reese	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	150

# **Community Outreach / Educational Activities**

The Columbia County Coroner and staff participated in the following Community Outreach and Educational functions in 2016:

- Coroner spoke regarding Drug Death investigation to Berwick Crime Watch Feb 16
- Coroner spoke to Berwick Area Anti-Drug Alliance May 16
- Coroner met with all County Funeral Directors in Jan 16
- Coroner presented EMS Continuing Education to Elysburg EMS in Jun 16
- Coroner and 2 deputies participated in East Central Terrorism Task Force Full Scale Exercise at Knoebels in Apr 16.
- Coroner participated in Bloomsburg University Active Shooter Exercise
- Coroner met Geisinger Bloomsburg Hospital Nursing Supervisor Staff regarding Coroner interaction with Hospital deaths.
- Coroner spoke to Millville Sisters of Good Intent Club regarding the role and duties of the Coroner.
- Coroner, 2 deputies, and Secretary attended New Coroner orientation course in Jun of 2016 in State College, Conducted by Pa State Coroner's Association.
- Coroner attended the PA State Coroner's Association conference in Sept 2016 in Williamsport.

  Deputy Coroner Beyer also attended 2 day continuing education portion of the Conference.
- Coroner and 2 Deputies attended Coroner Continuing Education Course hosted by Lycoming County Coroner's Office in Nov 2016.
- Coroner training held with Pennsylvania State Police Bloomsburg Criminal Investigation Unit
- Coroner initiated periodic briefings with members of Pennsylvania State Police Bloomsburg
   Criminal Investigation unit

# **Goals and Objectives for 2017**

The Columbia County Coroner has the following goals and objectives for 2017 to improve the operations of the Coroner's Office and to continue to serve the citizens of Columbia County:

- Implement Electronic Death reporting software Ecedent to be funded with Act 122 Death Certificate funds
- Purchase 2 digital Cameras with Act 122 Death Certificate Money
- Assemble County Child Death Review team
- Have 2 Deputy Coroners certified by PA Attorney General's Coroner Certification Course
- Coroner to attend Advanced Homicide investigation course in State College in Apr 17
- Coroner to attend PA State Coroner's Association Convention in Sept 17
- Attempt to use alternate toxicology testing in improve efficiency and potentially reduce costs.
- Meet with County Commissioners quarterly to review any significant issues within the Coroner's Office and address any concerns or questions.
- Develop a written Standard Operating Guideline.

#### Conclusion

2016 was the first year in office for Columbia County Coroner Jeremy Reese. Coroner Reese came into office with the objectives of improving communications with public safety partners, implementing community outreach, and adding technology to the Coroner's Office. Coroner Reese believes that he has accomplished these goals for his first year and office will continue to build upon some of these objectives in 2017.

As illustrated in this report the Coroner's Office also managed an increased caseload caused in part by the Drug Crisis, a Murder-Suicide Incident, and 4 child fatalities along with many other cases that required a comprehensive review and investigation to determine Cause and Manner of Death.

The Columbia County Coroner's Office will continue to conduct death investigations and serve the citizens of Columbia County with the utmost Professionalism, Dignity, and Respect that we owe to the lives of our decedents and their families.