Office of the Coroner
County of Chester
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Christina VandePol, M.D.
Coroner

2018 Annual Report
Table of Contents

Coroner’s Office Mission Statement ................................................................. 2
Letter from the Coroner ...................................................................................... 3
Executive Summary ......................................................................................... 4
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 5
  Description of Chester County and Its Population ....................................... 5
  Jurisdiction and State Statutes ...................................................................... 5
  Coroner’s Office Staff and Facilities ............................................................. 6
Coroner and Staff Functions ............................................................................. 7
Strategic Goals and Objectives ......................................................................... 8
Death Investigations .......................................................................................... 10
  Overview ...................................................................................................... 10
  Manner of Death: Homicide .......................................................................... 11
  Manner of Death: Accidental ......................................................................... 12
    Drug Overdose ......................................................................................... 13
  Falls ............................................................................................................. 15
  Motor Vehicle Accidents .............................................................................. 15
  Other Causes ............................................................................................... 15
  Manner of Death: Suicide ............................................................................ 15
  Manner of Death: Natural ........................................................................... 16
  Manner of death: Undetermined ................................................................. 17
  Child Fatalities ............................................................................................ 17
Unclaimed Individuals ....................................................................................... 18
Organ Donation ............................................................................................... 20
In the News ...................................................................................................... 21
  2018 Press Releases ..................................................................................... 21
Coroner’s Office Mission Statement

The Chester County Coroner’s Office is an independent agency serving the residents and honoring the deceased of the county by investigating the facts and circumstances concerning jurisdictional deaths which have occurred within Chester County in order to determine the cause and manner of death, the identity of the decedent, and to provide notification to the legal next of kin, while exhibiting the highest degree of compassion, professionalism, and integrity.

To achieve this mission, the Coroner’s Office will:

Treat decedents and their personal effects with dignity and respect, and without discrimination.

Coordinate investigative efforts with law enforcement, hospitals, and other agencies in a professional and courteous manner.

Conduct investigations and autopsies professionally, scientifically, and conscientiously.

Complete reports expeditiously with regard for the concerns of family members, the criminal justice system, and public health and safety.

Provide honest information to family members compassionately and courteously, with sensitivity for cultural differences.

Collect, compile, and disseminate information regarding deaths in a manner consistent with the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Provide medical and scientific testimony as required in court and in deposition.

Promote and advance through education the science and practice of death investigation.

Promote and maintain an emotionally and physically healthy and safe working environment for the Coroner’s employees, following applicable public health and government policies.

Expand communication throughout the community at large regarding the functions of the Coroner’s Office of the County of Chester.
Letter from the Coroner

The 2018 Annual Report of the Coroner’s Office shines a light on contemporary challenges that have not bypassed Chester County. Those challenges include substance abuse, suicide, a rapidly growing and often isolated elder population, child abuse, unclaimed decedents, and, despite advances in medicine, diseases and conditions often associated with sudden death.

The Coroner’s Office has an important public health role in bringing causes and manners of deaths to the attention of the public and many involved agencies. Data generated from coroner and medical examiner offices filter up through the Vital Statistics system, eventually reaching organizations like the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These data then become the basis for setting policies and allocating research funds.

Data, in fact, is one of the main visible outputs of any coroner’s office. Our Coroner’s Office website provides summarized data on a monthly basis, a task made easier by full implementation of a new electronic case management system (aptly named QuincyTech). In 2018, the number of overdose deaths was the most common information request. We provide drug death data to many agencies, including https://www.overdosefreepa.pitt.edu/.

In 2018 the lack of a centralized County morgue and autopsy laboratory became a critical issue. The borrowed space at local hospitals no longer suffices for a population of over 500,000 persons. I did an assessment of the need for Coroner’s Office services over the next 25 years along with a detailed analysis of the deficiencies of our current infrastructure. The findings were presented to the Chester County Commissioners in a 12-page white paper in September 2018. The full document can be found on our website at https://chesco.org/209/Coroner.

Finally, the news reminds me every day that our office needs to be prepared for an unexpected surge in deaths or even a mass fatality event. While we have an excellent emergency services network in Chester County, the reality is that not everyone survives disasters. In 2018, we held our first-ever mass fatality training exercise and used what we learned to update the existing 2012 plan. By working side-by-side with other County agencies, by training, and by putting adequate facilities in place, we will be ready to meet the needs of the community should the unthinkable happen here.

Let me end on a brighter note by saying that I am very proud of the fact that in 2018 we found a dignified resting place at Philadelphia Memorial Park (here in Chester County) for the cremains of over 50 unclaimed persons who had died in the previous 6 years. The Memorial Ceremony held November 8, 2018, was a reminder that we all have a moral responsibility to care for others, whether in life or death.

Christina VandePol, M.D.
Coroner of the County of Chester
Executive Summary

A continued increase in population and the demographic trend towards an older population increased the caseload and responsibilities of the Chester County Coroner’s Office in 2018. The opioid epidemic and associated drug overdose deaths also continued to contribute to the challenges faced by the Office.

Some of the 2018 accomplishments, events, and activities of the Coroner’s Office are summarized here:

- Chester County’s first woman Coroner, Dr. Christina VandePol, was sworn in on January 2, 2018.
- A total of 3,741 cases were investigated, including 1,137 death investigations and 2,604 cremation reviews and authorizations.
- The Coroner’s Office took jurisdiction in 668 deaths, almost all of which required a scene response.
- Autopsies were performed in 196 (29%) jurisdictional deaths.
- Jurisdictional deaths included 11 homicides, 232 accidental deaths, and 63 suicides.
- Accidental deaths included 112 drug overdoses, 63 falls, and 44 motor vehicle accidents.
- The number of drug overdose deaths declined by 22% from 2017.
- A total of 345 transports of decedents from a scene to a hospital morgue or between hospitals or morgues took place.
- The first-ever Coroner’s Office Mass Fatality Tabletop Exercise took place in June 2018.
- The position of First Deputy Coroner was re instituted to strengthen a number of functions including training and quality control oversight of investigations.
- Donated crypt interment space was found to serve as a dignified resting place for the cremains of more than 50 indigent and unclaimed persons. A Memorial Ceremony was held November 8, 2018.
- Twenty-seven (27) organ donors and 148 tissue donors resulted from cases reported to the Chester County Coroner’s Office by Gift of Life.
- The state legislature updated the Coroner Statute (County Code) effective 12/24/2018; changes included new fees for reports and new child death investigation requirements.
Introduction

Description of Chester County and Its Population

The United States Census Bureau estimate for the population of Chester County as of July 1, 2017 was 519,293 people, which is an increase of 516,312 from July 2016. Chester County’s population is made up of 80% Caucasian, 7.3% Hispanic or Latino, 6.3% African American, and 5.3% Asian peoples, with .7% identifying with two or more races, or as American Indian/Alaska native (0.3%) or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (0.1%).

Currently in Chester County 28.9% of the residents are under the age of 18, 62% are between the ages of 18 and 64, and 15.4% are 65 or older. Females make up 50.8% of the population in Chester County.

The Coroner’s Office serves the geographic area that includes 760 square miles of Chester County; bounded by Lancaster County to the west, Berks County to the north, Montgomery County to the northeast, Delaware County to the east, New Castle County in the state of Delaware to the southeast and Cecil County in the state of Maryland to the south.

Included within the County of Chester are 57 townships, 15 boroughs, one city, three airports and several colleges and universities served by the Coroner’s Office.

Chester County has five acute care hospitals: Brandywine Hospital, Chester County Hospital, Jennersville Hospital, Paoli Memorial Hospital, and Phoenixville Hospital, with one level-2 trauma center at Paoli Memorial Hospital. There are two veterans center, Coatesville Veterans Center and Southeast Veterans Center. Also located in the County of Chester are multiple hospice agencies, 29 nursing homes, 21 assisted living facilities, and over 52 home health care agencies.

Jurisdiction and State Statutes

The Coroner’s Office assumes jurisdiction on certain categories of deaths which occur in the County of Chester, regardless of whether the decedent was a County resident or non-resident. County residents who die in other counties do not fall under the Coroner’s Office jurisdiction, even if the precipitating event for the death occurred in Chester County. Only the Coroner can certify a death that occurred by other than a natural manner.

According to Pennsylvania Statute (16 P.S. § 1218-B “Coroner’s Investigation”), the categories of deaths that fall under the Coroner’s purview are:

1. Sudden death not related to a known medical condition or not certified by a licensed physician
2. Deaths occurring under suspicious circumstances including those where alcohol, drugs or other toxic compounds may have had a direct bearing on the outcome
3. Deaths occurring as a result of violence or trauma, whether apparently homicidal, suicidal or accidental

4. Any case where trauma, drug overdose or therapy, or medical treatment contributed to the death, including a perioperative death in which the death is not readily explainable on the basis of prior disease

5. Deaths where the body is unidentified or unclaimed.

6. Deaths known or suspected to be due to a contagious disease and constituting a public hazard

7. Deaths occurring in prison or while in custody of police

8. A death of an individual whose body is to be cremated, buried at sea, or otherwise disposed of so as to be thereafter unavailable for examination

9. Sudden unexplained infant deaths

10. A stillbirth (fetal death over 16 weeks gestation per Pennsylvania law)

The role of the Coroner in such deaths is to investigate the facts and circumstances concerning the death for the purpose of determining the cause and manner of death and whether there is sufficient reason for the Coroner to believe that the death may have resulted from a criminal act or criminal neglect of a person other than the deceased. If the investigation does not provide the necessary information, the coroner may perform an autopsy and/or conduct an inquest.

As part of his/her investigation, the Coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin of the death. Per coroner and medical examiner standards and our office policy, a scientific method of identification is required for all homicides and also whenever a visual identification is not able to be performed or is not confirmatory. Currently acceptable scientific methods are fingerprint comparison, dental comparison, and DNA comparison.

**Coroner’s Office Staff and Facilities**

The Coroner’s Office professional staff by the end of 2018 included the Coroner, Chief Deputy Coroner, First Deputy Coroner, Office Manager, Deputy Coroners (3 full-time and 6 part-time), Transporters (4), Forensic Pathologists (3), and an Autopsy Technician. All are County employees except the Coroner, who is an elected official, and the Forensic Pathologists, who are independent contractors. A Deputy Coroner, a Transporter, and a Supervisor (Coroner, Chief Deputy Coroner, or First Deputy Coroner) are on duty 24/7/365.

The Office had one administrative/investigator vehicle used by investigators for scene responses throughout the County, and two transport vehicles, a van and a newly purchased (2018) Ford F250 truck.
Administrative offices are in the Government Services Building at 601 Westtown Road in West Chester, while morgue facilities are distributed among the hospitals, as detailed below. In 2018, autopsies were performed in two locations, Brandywine Hospital and Chester County Hospital.

In the absence of a county morgue, the Coroner’s Office shares the morgue facilities of four of the hospitals located within Chester County. When not needed for those who have died in the hospital (non-Coroner’s cases), the Coroner’s Office had use of up to the following number of morgue spaces in 2018:

- Brandywine Hospital - 2
- Chester County Hospital – 4
- Paoli Memorial Hospital - 2
- Phoenixville Hospital – 4

**Coroner and Staff Functions**

The staff members of the Coroner’s Office are involved in a wide variety of activities commensurate with the mission of the office. These include responding to and investigating deaths falling under the Coroner’s purview, performing postmortem examinations, certifying the cause and manner of death, and providing information and assistance to families. Investigators, who are familiar with the emotional trauma of an unexpected death, communicate directly with the family as do the Coroner and Chief Deputy Coroner, who review findings with families in order to answer the many questions that accompany a sudden or traumatic loss of life.

In all cases investigated by the Coroner, it is essential that the decedent’s identity is established and the next-of-kin is located and notified regarding the death. In certain cases, identification requires additional effort in locating premortem dental, medical, or police records. Another function of the Coroner’s Office is identifying the legal next-of-kin and informing them of a death. Some individuals may have died leaving no next-of-kin or next-of-kin cannot be located. The Coroner’s Office is frequently assisted by law enforcement in identifying bodies or next of kin. Ensuring that all leads have been exhausted in pursuit of next-of-kin can be a very time-consuming but ultimately rewarding effort.

All autopsies are performed by a board-certified forensic pathologist at the direction of the Coroner. If a postmortem examination (autopsy, toxicology, other tests) is required in order to determine cause and manner of death, various body fluids and tissues for microscopic and toxicological analysis may be examined in addition to the anatomic examination. Photographs are taken during an autopsy and are available for review at a later date if needed. Photographic documentation is also an essential item in those cases where the pathologist must provide court testimony. The forensic pathologists and investigators may provide testimony in court and at depositions. Staff also participates in meetings with police, medical professionals, and attorneys.

Autopsy reports and related data from individual investigations are provided to law enforcement agencies, prosecuting attorneys, and other agencies including Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Federal Aviation Administration, National Transportation Safety
Board, the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Drug Enforcement Agency if they are involved with the case.

Funeral homes that plan on cremating an individual who died in Chester County are required to complete a cremation authorization request and submit a copy of the death certificate to our office. The Coroner’s Office reviews these documents and if there are no medical questions relating to the death of the individual, the office will issue a cremation authorization. If there are medical questions relating to the death, a case is opened and the Coroner’s staff will investigate the death before issuing a cremation authorization.

The Coroner, Chief Deputy Coroner, and Forensic Pathologists participate in a variety of medical conferences, and provide information on a regular basis to law enforcement and to medical personnel on various aspects regarding the role and function of the Coroner’s Office.

The Coroner’s Office staff analyzes its data to study relevant death investigation topics with application in such fields as law enforcement, medicine, law, social sciences, and injury prevention. Examples include infant mortality, suicide, child abuse, vehicular traffic accidents, and investigation of therapeutic complication deaths.

The public is kept informed about public health and safety issues as well as the activities of the Coroner’s Office by press releases, up-to-date statistics on the agency website, a social media presence (on Facebook @ChesCoCoronerPA), and presentations to schools, senior communities, and other organizations.

**Strategic Goals and Objectives**

Chester County government developed a new 5-year plan in 2018 to cover the period from 2019 through 2023. The Coroner’s Office identified the following strategic goals and related objectives necessary for the Coroner’s Office to continue to provide timely and legally defensible death investigations over that time period:

- **Planning for Future Needs**
  - The majority of investigators will be certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI)
  - Shifts will be adequately staffed to handle daily caseload without overtime
  - 100% of bodies will be able to be stored in a modern refrigerated County morgue
  - The Mass Fatality Plan will be updated and reviewed annually
- Death certificates will be processed by the Electronic Death Reporting System (EDRS)

- **Achieving Accreditation by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners**
  - Meet Administrative Standards
  - Meet Investigation Standards
  - Meet Morgue, Autopsy, and Laboratory Standards

- **Improving Communication**
  - Monthly death statistics available on the website within 30 days
  - Annual Report available on the website within 90 days
  - 100% increase from 2019 to 2023 in number of public communications and presentations to hospitals, schools, health care providers, criminal justice agencies, seniors, and other community organizations
Death Investigations

Overview

Death investigations are classified, counted, and reported in three different categories: non-jurisdictional, jurisdictional and cremation authorization. Non-jurisdictional cases are deaths which are reported to the Coroner’s Office where a physician with knowledge and awareness of the decedent’s state of health certifies the death certificate. These are natural deaths, with a predominance of individuals in nursing homes and hospitals. Jurisdictional cases are deaths where the Coroner certifies the cause and manner of an individual’s death. All non-natural deaths can only be certified by the Coroner.

For the year 2018, the Chester County Coroner’s Office conducted 1,137 death investigations and authorized 2,604 cremations for a total of 3,741 cases (Table 1). Cause and manner of death as well as interpretations of what is a jurisdictional or non-jurisdictional case are often a matter of judgment and therefore strict comparisons across years are not valid. Nevertheless, there appears to be a gradual increase in both death investigations and cremation reviews over the past 5 years. This is not unexpected given the increase in the County’s total population, the more rapid increase in the number of persons over age 65, and the trend towards cremation rather than burial over that time period.

The percentage of jurisdictional cases that had an autopsy performed in 2018 was only 29%, despite the fact that a new policy was put in place early in the year requiring almost all drug overdose cases to be autopsied. Twenty years ago (1999), autopsies in Chester County were performed on as many as 72% of death investigation cases (1999 Annual Report), with the percentage dwindling to a low of 28% by 2017. Undoubtedly one reason for this is the increasing sophistication of medical diagnostics which allows the cause of death to be determined to a reasonable degree of medical certainty without an autopsy. The advent of electronic medical records and efficient access to such records by coroners and medical examiners has also streamlined investigation into a decedent’s medical history.

The Chester County Coroner’s Office sends reports on all violent deaths to the PA Violent Death Reporting System (PA-VDRS). This includes all deaths where the manner of death was homicide, suicide, or accidental. Accidents are the second most common manner of death after natural deaths and include all drug overdoses, motor vehicle accidents, and falls. Separate sections in this report provide greater insight into each of these categories.
Table 1. 2018 Statistical Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reported Cases</td>
<td>1,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-jurisdictional Cases</td>
<td>469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurisdictional Cases</td>
<td>668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Causes</td>
<td>821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Human Remains</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Autopsies</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Autopsies</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Examination Only</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxicological tests performed</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transports (total)</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified Bodies</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhumations</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cremation permits issued</td>
<td>2,604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Manner of Death: Homicide

The Coroner classifies a death as a homicide if the death results from injuries inflicted by another person. In this context, the word homicide does not necessarily imply the existence of criminal intent behind the action of the other person. This is reflected in the fact that the prosecuting attorney may either charge the person responsible for the injuries with murder or manslaughter, or decline to file charges. In 2018, the Coroner classified eleven deaths as homicides.

The eleven homicide victims ranged in age from 5 years to 89 years, with six males and five females. Four were African American and seven were Caucasian. Eight of the deaths were from firearms, two from blunt impact trauma, and one was from strangulation. All five females and one male were victims of domestic violence. Two were killed by a spouse or domestic partner, three by other family members, and one by a housemate. All of the male and two of the female victims died of gunshot wounds.
Manner of Death: Accidental

The Coroner certified 232 deaths as accidental in 2018. Almost half (48%) were due to a drug overdose, while falls (27%) were the second most common cause of accidental death. Individuals who died as a result of a motor vehicle accident comprised the third most common type of accidental death (19%). Since all accidental deaths are theoretically preventable, each such death is carefully investigated for public health purposes.
2018 Accidental Deaths = 232

Figure 2. 2018 Accidental Deaths

Drug Overdose

The number of drug overdose deaths classified as accidental in Chester County in 2018 was 112. Although this represented a 22% decrease from the 144 accidental drug overdose deaths in 2017, the opioid epidemic continued to be a major focus of concern in Chester County in 2018. It is not known whether the decrease in deaths represents a lower incidence of addiction or simply more effective prevention of deaths, possibly due to extensive use of the antidote naloxone (Narcan®).

As in past years, demographic analysis showed males (72% of cases) and Caucasians (82% of cases) to be disproportionately represented in drug overdose death statistics. The age distribution continued to be broad, with all ages represented. As in previous years, however, the 25-34 years age group had the highest number of deaths (Figure 3).
Expanded forensic toxicological testing was performed on suspected drug overdose deaths, allowing confirmation of the cause of death and identification of trends in both illicit and prescription drug abuse. Opioids remained the most common category of drugs found on such testing, with fentanyl present in more than 70% of drug overdose deaths (Figure 4).

Drug overdose deaths are extensively investigated. The Coroner’s Office instituted a new policy in early 2018 of performing autopsies in almost all suspected drug overdose cases. Drug overdose is a diagnosis of exclusion so an autopsy allows ruling out of other causes of death. It
also supports law enforcement efforts where charges of “drug delivery resulting in death” are pending. A less-appreciated aspect of overdose death investigations is that they illuminate circumstances or conditions that may have played a role in the death. Interviews with family or friends may reveal, for example, that a drug overdose death occurred within days of release from prison or from a rehabilitation facility. This type of data provides guidance for prevention policies and programs.

The Chester County Coroner’s Office takes an active role in sharing its data and insights regarding overdose deaths with a number of community organizations. Coroner Christina VandePol is a member of the Chester County Overdose Prevention Task Force, participates in the Regional Overdose Prevention Coalition, and is on the Advisory Board of the West Chester Mayor’s Opioid Action Task Force.

**Falls**
There were 63 falls in 2018 accounting for 27% of accidental deaths. The majority of these deaths due to falls were in those age 75 years or older (53/63, 84%). Falls were sometimes a direct cause of death such as when they resulted in head trauma, for example, a subdural hemorrhage. Falls were also often an indirect cause of death, especially in the elderly. For example, a fall may result in a fracture which requires surgery with the subsequent hospital course including complications such as pneumonia or sepsis.

**Motor Vehicle Accidents**
Motor vehicle accidents accounted for the third largest group of accidental deaths, 44/232 (19%). Decedents in the driver’s seat accounted for 35 of the 44 deaths, while 5 were in a passenger seat, and 4 were pedestrians.

Twenty-six drivers had toxicological testing performed. Nine (34.6%) of those were positive for alcohol, with 8 having levels above the legal limit (BAC 0.08). Even more common was the presence of drugs, which were found in 11 (42.6%) of those tested. Drugs included opioids (4), delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol—the active ingredient in marijuana (4), methamphetamine (2), and prescription drugs (1).

**Other Causes**
Three accidental deaths were weather related, two due to blunt trauma, two due to falling objects, two the result of fires, and one each from drowning, choking, exsanguination, and complications of surgery.

**Manner of Death: Suicide**
Suicides are those deaths caused by self-inflicted injuries with evidence of intent to end one’s life. Evidence of intent can include explicit expression such as a suicide note or verbal threat, or an act constituting implicit intent, such as deliberately placing a gun to one’s head or rigging a vehicle’s exhaust.

In 2018, there were 63 suicides (Figure 5), accounting for 5.5% of the total deaths reported to the Coroner’s office, slightly fewer than in 2017 when there were 68 suicides, accounting for 6% (68/1,220) of deaths that year. Individuals who committed suicide were between 14 to 94 years
and the majority, 45/63 (71.4%), were male. These demographics were similar to those observed in 2017.

The proportion of suicide deaths involving firearms increased from 38% in 2017 to 55.6% in 2018. Hangings were the cause of death in 22.2% and drug overdoses in 9.5% of the 2018 suicide deaths.

![2018 Suicides = 63](image)

**Figure 5. 2018 Chester County Suicides**

**Manner of Death: Natural**

The Coroner may certify natural deaths under many circumstances. They include a sudden and unexpected death in an apparently healthy individual, when there is no physician able or willing to certify the death, when there is no next of kin, or when there are suspicious circumstances surrounding the death.

In 2018, 821 natural deaths were investigated by the Coroner’s Office. This included 31 fetal demises (age <0), discussed in the Child Fatalities section below. As shown in Figure 6, the majority of the remaining natural deaths occurred in the older age groups.
Manner of death: Undetermined

The Coroner’s Office certifies the manner of death as undetermined when available information regarding the circumstances of death is insufficient to classify the death into one of the four specific manners of death: natural, accident, homicide or suicide.

In some cases, serious doubt exists as to whether an injury occurred with intent or as a result of an accident. Information concerning the circumstances may be lacking due to the absence of background information or witnesses, or because of a lengthy delay between death and discovery of the body. Moreover, it may be difficult to assess street drug or medication overdose deaths as showing enough features to reasonably determine the manner of death. If an extensive investigation and autopsy cannot clarify the circumstances, the death is classified undetermined.

There were eight cases in 2018 where the Coroner’s Office certified the manner of death as undetermined after autopsy and toxicology studies. The causes were: smoke inhalation (n=1), sudden unexpected infant death (n=1), asphyxia (n=2), blunt impact trauma (n=2) and undetermined (n=2).

Child Fatalities

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania categorizes anyone under 21 as a “child” for purposes of inclusion in Child Fatality Review Committees. The deaths of 21 persons under age 21 were reported to the Coroner’s Office in 2018. Five were 18-20 years of age at the time of death, while 16 individuals were less than 18 years of age.
The Coroner is a member of the Chester County Child Fatality Review Committee and the Coroner or an investigator regularly attends these meetings. We report on those child deaths that occurred within the County, regardless of residence of the decedent. The Committee, however, reviews child deaths for any child that was a resident of the County. In those cases where the child died elsewhere, for example, in Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the death is reviewed by the Chester County Committee.

The manner of death for child deaths in Chester County was natural in 9 (43%), accidental in 5 (24%), suicide in 3 (14%), undetermined in 3 (14%), and homicide in 1 (5%) of the 21 decedents.

In the 5 decedents aged 18, 19, or 20 years of age, the manner of death was suicide in 2 cases, accidental in 2 cases, and natural in 1 case.

There were 9 (nine) deaths in children 3 years or younger in 2018. The revised Pennsylvania Coroner statute requires Coroners to investigate deaths of children 3 years of age or less and specifies procedures to be carried out during the investigation. The Chester County Coroner’s Office was already conducting full investigations into such deaths. Six (67%) of the nine deaths were natural in manner, 1 was accidental, and in 2 the manner of death was undetermined. Five of the natural deaths occurred in newborn infants in a hospital setting within days of birth; four of the five newborns were premature.

Fetal demises (also known as stillbirths) for fetuses 16 weeks gestation or older are also reported to the Coroner’s Office per state statute. A total of 31 such reports were made in 2018.

### Unclaimed Individuals

In some circumstances the County of Chester becomes responsible for the disposition of an individual’s body after death:

1. No other family members are known to exist.
2. The legal next of kin cannot be located after an exhaustive search.
3. The family refuses to provide for the final arrangements for financial or other reasons.

During the last four years, there has been an increase in the number of next of kin who relinquish rights to the deceased individual to the Coroner’s office because they cannot or do not want to incur the expense associated with the final arrangements for their relative. The Coroner’s office will cremate individuals who have been turned over to the county in this way as long as they have been identified.

There were 23 County cremations in 2017 with the cremains of five individuals later retrieved by next-of-kin or a representative of the estate.

The cremains of unclaimed individuals are kept by the Coroner’s office for a minimum of one year, after which time the cremains are interred in a burial plot donated to the county.
In 2018, more than 50 cremains had been in storage at the Coroner’s Office for more than a year, some for as long as 6 years. Efforts were made to identify a non-denominational cemetery for final disposition of these cremains; Philadelphia Memorial Park in Frazer, Chester County, donated an interment crypt to hold these as well as future cremains. A Memorial Ceremony was held November 8, 2019 to commemorate these previously “forgotten souls.” A memorial plaque reading “Chester County 2018 – Forgotten No More” was purchased by the County to identify the resting place.
Organ Donation

The Chester County Coroner’s Office is proud of its cooperation with Gift of Life, the regional Organ Procurement Organization (OPO). Our office is contacted by Gift of Life on all hospital deaths of potential donors to confirm whether a death is a Coroner case and if so, what organs or tissue may be able to be donated if permission is granted by the family.

Table 2 summarizes donations from cases reported to the Chester County Coroner’s Office by Gift of Life in 2018. Fifty-eight organs from 27 donors were transplanted and 326 tissues from 148 donors were recovered.

Table 2. 2018 Organ and Tissue Donation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organ Donation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referrals of organ donors from hospitals</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Organ Donors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Organ Donors</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Declined</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Arrested</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coroner Declines</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organs Transplanted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidneys</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lungs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tissue Donation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals of tissue donors from hospitals</td>
<td>3,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals from coroner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Tissue Donors</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Tissues Recovered per donor     |  |
| Corneas                         | 100 |
| Bone                            | 104 |
| Skin                            | 97  |
| Heart Valve                     | 5   |
| Vein                            | 10  |
In the News

2018 Press Releases

January 12, 2018

Skeletal Remains found in Caln Township in 2017 Positively Identified as those of Missing Marcus Hook Woman

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has positively identified the skeletal remains found in Caln Township in March 2017 as those of Barbara Keenan of Marcus Hook, Delaware County, PA. The results of a forensic DNA analysis performed by the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification were received on January 8, 2018, and provided the basis for this definitive identification.

Christina VandePol, M.D., Chester County Coroner, stated “This DNA identification finally allows closure for Ms. Keenan’s family, which has been notified of these findings. Although forensic DNA testing is complex and takes time, it leaves no doubt as to identity. With current DNA identification techniques using STR (short tandem repeats) and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis, scientists can determine identity with extreme precision even in difficult situations like this.”

A presumptive identification of the remains as those of Barbara Keenan, 52, of Marcus Hook, Delaware County, was made by Caln Police and the Chester County Coroner’s Office on March 25, 2017. Information released at that time by Caln Police noted that Keenan had last been seen in Caln when she was discharged from Brandywine Hospital on July 9, 2016.

Prior to DNA testing, a forensic anthropological examination was performed by Dr. Dennis C. Dirkmaat of the Forensic Anthropology Laboratory at Mercyhurst University in Erie, PA. The examination did not reveal any suspicious findings. The Chester County Coroner’s Office stated that in the absence of further information the cause and manner of death remain undetermined.

February 12, 2018

Chester County Coroner’s Office Statement on Drug Overdose Death Certificates

The Philadelphia Inquirer recently reported on the lack of drug information on Pennsylvania’s 2016 drug overdose death certificates. (http://www.philly.com/philly/health/addiction/drug-overdose-opioid-crisis-pennsylvania-not-tracking-20180209.html). According to the report, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that the specific drugs involved were listed on only 42% of Chester County drug death certificates that year.
“This is older information, but it illustrates the lack of communication between agencies at the national and even state level,” stated Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner. “The CDC is seeing only one part of the picture. Full information on the drugs found in drug overdose deaths is available, at least for Chester County. This office prepares death certificates that go to the Department of Health (Vital Statistics) and eventually to CDC. We also prepare separate drug death reports that go to three county agencies, three state agencies, and at least one Federal agency (DEA). For privacy reasons, the drug death reports do not contain identifiable information like names or addresses. Reporting through multiple channels can result in confusion and is an unnecessary stress on the strained resources of coroner and medical examiner offices.”

VandePol, who was sworn into office on January 2, described her office’s policy for 2018 drug overdose death certificates. “When we investigate a possible drug overdose death, we do an initial screening for common drugs like fentanyl, heroin, and some prescription drugs. If that screen is positive, we order forensic toxicology testing by NMS Labs to confirm what drugs are present and in what quantities. Those tests can take up to 6 weeks. Meanwhile, we issue a death certificate listing the cause of death as “pending” so families can proceed with funeral arrangements. Once the forensic toxicology results are available, we issue a final death certificate with the cause of death and drugs that contributed to the fatal outcome.”

“Toxicology tests are very challenging to interpret because of individual differences as well as complex drug interactions,” said VandePol. “It is not unusual to have 5 or more different drugs present. Sometimes it’s clear that one drug was the likely cause of death, but often lethal levels of multiple drugs are present.

Chester County is one of 28 Pennsylvania counties that voluntarily provide data on drug overdose deaths, including toxicology results, to a collaborative program of the DEA Philadelphia Field Division DEA and the University of Pittsburgh. The detailed analysis of this state and county level data can be viewed at www.overdosefreepa.pitt.edu.

February 27, 2018

Coroner’s Office reports 11 Influenza Deaths so far in 2018

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has received reports to date of 11 deaths associated with influenza during the 2017-2018 reporting period. By comparison, five deaths due to influenza were reported during the 2016-2017 flu season.

Influenza was the primary cause of death in 6 of the 11 cases and a contributory factor in 5 other cases. Influenza type A was identified in 3 cases; no typing was available for the other 8 cases.

Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner, said “Any influenza death is required to be reported to our office, but often we learn of a case only during our review of cremation permits, so the actual number of such deaths is probably higher than 11. Fortunately, it appears that influenza deaths and illness are finally starting to decrease after an unusually active season this winter.”
Influenza A(H3N2) has been the most prevalent flu virus in the United States this year. Although the current vaccine is only about 25% effective against that particular strain, vaccination can still prevent thousands of cases of influenza, according to CDC.

All but one of the 11 deaths associated with influenza in Chester County occurred in persons over 65 years of age, a population at higher risk of flu-related complications. No deaths due to influenza were reported in Chester County in two other high-risk groups, children under 5 and pregnant women.

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**March 1, 2018**

**Laboratory Death involving Hazardous Materials Unit**

The Uwchlan Township Police Department and the Lionville Ambulance Corps were called to the scene of a reported death at Frontage Laboratories, Inc. on Tuesday afternoon, February 28. The decedent was identified as Exton resident Ge Guo, 26, who worked at the facility. The Chester County Hazardous Materials Unit was called in when it was learned that the death might be associated with exposure to an unknown amount of potassium cyanide, a material to which the decedent had access in the course of her work. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) was notified and is in contact with Frontage Laboratories. There were no reports of illness or injury to any other employees at the site.

Potassium cyanide is a solid material but releases hydrogen cyanide gas which interferes with oxygen use in the body. Organs most susceptible to lack of oxygen are the brain and the heart. Ingestion or inhalation can cause systemic toxicity and severe exposure can be rapidly fatal.

Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner, said “This tragic and dangerous situation illustrates the importance of training for the unexpected. Chester County is fortunate to have dedicated and highly-trained first responders. Our Deputy Coroners often work in difficult and hazardous situations and we depend on teams like those in Uwchlan yesterday to keep us safe as we do our investigations. We are also grateful to the Lancaster County Coroner’s Office which granted us permission to transport the body to an isolation unit at their Lancaster County Forensic Center. Chester County does not have a dedicated morgue or autopsy facility and it would not be prudent to use a local hospital morgue while we are unsure of the potential risk.”

The cause and manner of death are currently under investigation by the Coroner’s office. The family has been notified.

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**May 25, 2018**

**Death of Former Reality TV Star Brian Lancaster**

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has released information about the death of Brian Lancaster. Lancaster, a former reality TV show competitor who died March 29, 2018 at
Phoenixville Hospital in Phoenixville, Pa was 43. The cause of death was fentanyl, heroin, and ethanol intoxication, with the manner of death being accidental.

Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner, stated “While some progress is being made in the battle against substance abuse, we continue to lose too many members of our community to this epidemic. Speaking with families like Mr. Lancaster’s, I hear so often about how difficult it is to fight addiction and how we are losing talented and loved people to this disease.”

June 7, 2018

Williams Murder/Suicide

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has completed its investigation of the death of Stephanie C. Williams, 50, of West Goshen. An autopsy revealed that Ms. Williams died of gunshot wounds to the chest and head, with the manner of death being homicide. The cause of death for Charles Williams, 52, of the same address, was a gunshot wound to the head, with the manner determined to be suicide. Toxicology tests for Charles Williams are pending. The case is under the jurisdiction of the West Goshen police which is continuing its investigation.

June 30, 2018

Skeletal Remains Found in Oxford, Pa

On June 26, 2018 the Chester County Coroner’s Office was requested by the Pennsylvania State Police Avondale Barracks to investigate the death of an unidentified individual whose skeletal remains were found inside a tent in a wooded area. The tent was noticed by an employee of the Oxford Water Treatment Plant.

No identification was found on the individual at the scene. The Chester County Coroner’s Office has made a tentative identification; however, a definitive confirmation of the individual’s identity is pending further testing.

One method of definitive identification is through dental confirmation, also known as forensic odontology. This confirmation is performed by a forensic odontologist who compares premortem dental x-rays of the presumed individual with teeth found in the skeletal remains.

Additional methods of definitive identification which may be used in some circumstances include visual confirmation, fingerprinting, or DNA.

The cause of death is pending further investigation by the Chester County Coroner’s Office.
August 20, 2018

Coroner’s Office reports Kratom-associated Deaths

The Chester County Coroner’s Office is reporting two deaths attributed to mitragynine toxicity.

Ryan Jones of Caln Township died 4/30/2018 with the cause of death determined to be mitragynine toxicity with hypertensive cardiovascular disease as a contributing condition. Caleb Jonathan Sturgis of West Bradford Township died 6/27/2018 of acute mitragynine intoxication. The manner of death was accidental in both cases.

According to the American Chemical Society, “mitragynine is the predominant alkaloid produced by the southeastern Asian plant Mitragyna speciosa...” M. speciosa is commonly known as kratom and remains legal to buy and use in Pennsylvania. It is unregulated although both the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have expressed concerns. In a 5/22/2018 press release, the FDA “…continues to warn consumers not to use any products labeled as containing the botanical substance kratom or its psychoactive compounds, mitragynine and 7-hydroxymitragynine. The FDA encourages more research to better understand kratom’s safety profile, including the use of kratom combined with other drugs.”

Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner, said “Unfortunately, there is little research available on kratom. These deaths obviously raise our level of concern, however, and I encourage health care providers to be on the alert for its use in our community.

September 20, 2018

Samuel Algarin Death

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has completed its investigation of the death of Samuel Algarin, 31, of Quarryville, PA. Mr. Algarin was found deceased by the side of Limestone Road in West Fallowfield Township, Chester County, on September 13, 2018. An autopsy revealed that Mr. Algarin died of a gunshot wound to the torso, with the manner of death being homicide by firearm. The cause and manner of death were not previously released by the Coroner’s Office due to the ongoing active investigation of this homicide.

“We grieve the death of Samuel Algarin and are thinking of him and his family,” said Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner. “Like everyone, we are relieved that an arrest has been made and will continue to work with law enforcement and the District Attorney’s office as the legal process moves forward.”
September 26, 2018

Deaths of Nancy and William Rogal

The Chester County Coroner’s Office has completed its investigation of the death of Bruce Dalton Rogal, 59, who died on Thursday, September 20, 2018. Bruce Rogal of Downingtown, PA died of an intraoral gunshot wound, with the manner of death being suicide by firearm. Bruce Rogal was the suspect in the murders of his parents, William and Nancy Rogal, at the Bellingham Retirement Community and the attempted murder of his ex-wife on September 19, 2018. The Coroner’s Office was contacted after he was found deceased in his vehicle following a high speed chase by the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP), an exchange of gunfire during the chase, and the crashing of his vehicle into his ex-wife’s home.

“The Coroner’s Office is an independent agency charged with investigating the facts and circumstances concerning jurisdictional deaths within Chester County,” said Dr. Christina VandePol, Chester County Coroner. “Jurisdictional deaths include any death involving violence, as in this case. In addition to examining the decedent at the scene where he was found, we performed an autopsy which showed that Bruce Rogal died of a single self-inflicted intraoral gunshot wound. There were no other potentially fatal injuries. The PSP, the District Attorney’s Office, and the decedent’s next of kin have been notified of these findings.”

October 25, 2018

Identification of Unclaimed Cremains 2011-2017

The Chester County Coroner’s Office is planning to inter the unclaimed cremains of the following 54 individuals in the near future. All cremains have been retained by the Coroner’s Office for at least one year. This information is provided as a final notification to any next of kin (closest living relative). If you are the next of kin or an interested party who would like to claim someone’s cremains, please call the Office at 610-344-6165.

James Lloyd, 68, of Kennett Square Borough, died on July 28, 2011; manner natural.
Nancy Knoble, 71, of Phoenixville Borough, died on December 13, 2011; manner natural.
Glennis Gibson, 75, of Phoenixville Borough, died January 19, 2012; manner natural.
Walter Beard, 78, of Coatesville City, died February 29, 2012; manner natural.
Raymond Parker, 66, of Phoenixville Borough, died May 13, 2012; manner natural.
Thomas Wargo, 57, of Phoenixville Borough, died June 8, 2012; manner natural.
John Marmion, 69, of Malvern, died September 13, 2012; manner natural.
Ruth E. Ragatky, 74, of Wayne, died January 2, 2013; manner natural.
Joan Fleischmann, 79, of Royersford, died January 2, 2013; manner natural.
Anthony Mastrippolito, 75, of West Chester, died January 28, 2013; manner natural.
Gerald Palmer, 68, of Coatesville City, died February 14, 2013; manner natural.
Eugene Kratz, 58, of West Chester, died April 15, 2013; manner natural.
Hildegard Santoro, 80, of West Chester, died May 10, 2013; manner natural.
Dana Welch, 53, of Phoenixville Borough, died July 23, 2013; manner natural.
Jerry Zeimer, 48, of Honey Brook Borough, died July 31, 2013; manner accidental.
Gerald Matthew Egan, 57, of Spring City, died August 20, 2013; manner accidental.
Robert Gordon, 53, of West Chester Borough, died August 21, 2013; manner suicide.
Gary Madrigale, 58, of King of Prussia, died September 21, 2013; manner natural.
Anne Hall, 70, of Phoenixville Borough, died October 14, 2013; manner natural.
Kathleen Morse, 60, of Oxford, died December 12, 2013; manner natural.
Nancy Kay Hershey, 72, of Spring City, died February 15, 2014; manner natural.
Joaquin Martinez, 62, of Coatesville City, died April 1, 2014; manner natural.
Ruth Powers, 68, of Devon, died October 7, 2014; manner natural.
Edward Testerman, 48, of Spring City, died November 30, 2014; manner natural.
Clive Newcomb, 76, of Coatesville City, died December 5, 2014; manner natural.
Robert Barnett, 57, of Spring City, died December 17, 2014; manner natural.
Craig Stiteler, 54, of Elverson, died December 31, 2014; manner natural.
Lawrence Gabrielle, 62, of Phoenixville Borough, died January 23, 2015; manner natural.
Kenn Defreitas, 54, of Coatesville, died March 9, 2015; manner accidental.
Alfred B. Gray, 54, of Coatesville City, died April 1, 2015; manner natural.
Michelle Peel, 45, of Phoenixville Borough, died May 29, 2015; manner accidental.
Mary Arnold, 85, of Phoenixville Borough, died June 10, 2015; manner natural.
John Krastins, 61, of Phoenixville Borough, died July 23, 2015; manner suicide.
Shelby Radick, 53, of Toughkenamon, died September 23, 2015; manner natural.
Robert O’Neil, 85, of Phoenixville Borough, died October 30, 2015; manner natural.
Ignacio Rodriguez, 61, of Lanecaster, died November 14, 2015; manner suicide.
Thomas R. Clay, 86, of Exton, died November 22, 2015; manner natural.
Adelheid Buss, 82, of Coatesville, died December 20, 2015; manner natural.
Kenneth Thompson, 64, of Coatesville, died December 21, 2015; manner natural.
Theresa Panton, 60, of West Chester, died January 3, 2016; manner natural.
Bonita Hess, 70, of Downingtown, died January 6, 2016; manner natural.
Carol Buckle, 56, of Cochranville, died February 3, 2016; manner suicide.
Thomas Gierke, 53, of Spring City, died March 12, 2016; manner accidental.
Janice Henningsen, 69, of Berwyn, died March 16, 2016; manner accidental.
Jack Cooper, 72, of Pottstown, died March 20, 2016; manner natural.
Gary Jennings, 71, of Exton, died September 2, 2016; manner natural.
Leroy Bowman, 46, of Coatesville, died November 10, 2016; manner accidental.
Ernestine Umile, 85, of Downingtown, died December 27, 2016; manner natural.
John Carey, 63, of Coatesville, died February 23, 2017; manner natural.
Jason Witte, 40, of Phoenixville, died March 25, 2017; manner natural.
James Sturges, 58, of Phoenixville Borough, died July 6, 2017; manner natural.
December 19, 2018

Woodward and Heck Murder/Suicide

The Chester County Coroner’s office has completed its investigation of the December 16, 2018 deaths of Heather Woodward, 39 and Warnell Heck, 40. The deaths occurred at the Phoenixville Borough residence of the decedents. An autopsy revealed that heather Woodward died of a gunshot wound to the head, with the manner of death being homicide. The cause of death for Warnell Heck was a gunshot wound to the head, with the manner determined to be suicide. The case is under the jurisdiction of the Phoenixville Borough Police.