

# AGENDA ITEM REPORT



**Date:** February 16, 2022  
**To:** Board of County Commissioners  
**From:** Julie Sackrider, Mgmt Info Analyst  
**Department:** Administration  
**Subject:** Establishment of Civilian Based Coroner Scene Investigation Unit

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Coroner services in the state of Kansas are required in each county as established by state statute. Prior to the mid-1990s, coroner services were provided by an appointed pathologist affiliated with Lawrence Memorial Hospital. This physician, Dr. Carol Moddrell, retained the position for nineteen years in addition to duties as a pathologist at the hospital.

In 1996, Dr. Erik Mitchell was appointed Douglas County Coroner. Dr. Mitchell was at the time the coroner for Shawnee County, Kansas. Dr. Mitchell created Frontier Forensics, a private entity, that provided coroner services to several smaller counties in Kansas, including Douglas County. The model that was employed for Douglas County was a public/private partnership whereby autopsies and other forensic work was provided by Frontier Forensics and coroner scene investigators (CSIs) were provided by Douglas County Ambulance Service (DCAS). In the initial stages of the partnership, the caseload of the CSIs, less than 100/year, required three paramedics for 24/7 investigative coverage. Additional training in coroner scene investigation was provided to the three paramedics and the additional duties were paid to the individuals as incentive pay on top of the regular wage.

In 1998, the county ambulance service and city fire department merged into one department, Lawrence-Douglas County Fire & Medical Department (LDCFM). LDCFM provides county-wide ambulance service and city-wide fire protection. All employees became City of Lawrence employees and the City of Lawrence and Douglas County entered into a shared services agreement to determine the acquired budgetary burdens for each entity. The coroner scene investigation program was retained and as the demand for services increased with population growth, the number of CSIs increased to the current number of six on-duty firefighter/paramedics (two per 24 hour) shift and one full-time (40 hours/week) program manager. The current caseload is approximately 300 cases/year. CSI duties are provided to the county as an incentive-based system on top of regularly assigned department duties. Currently, coroner services are provided by Forensic Medical of Kansas City, who acquired Frontier Forensics in 2018.

Following the review of the Emergency Services Agreement RFP that was conducted by Wichita State University in 2021, LDCFM identified that the current CSI model directly impacts the availability of emergency medical services provided within Douglas County. Starting in January 2022, LDCFM agrees to provide CSI services for a transition period of undetermined time, following which, they will no longer provide CSIs for Douglas County.

In September 2021, Forensic Medical provided a proposal to Douglas County for CSI coverage. After review and discussion with the Sheriff's Office, it was determined that developing an in-house program would be more effective and was preferred. Frontier Medical has been consulted and they are supportive of this approach. A work group was formed consisting of Sarah Plinsky, County Administrator; Sheriff Jay Armbrister; Undersheriff Stacy Simmons; Major Steve Buchholz; Captain Dan O'Hare; and Julie Sackrider, Management Information Analyst. Mike Baxter, Fire Chief of Consolidated Fire District #1 was also part of the initial conversation. Ed Noonan, former Lieutenant/CSI Program Manager with LDCFM was brought on board with his experience in having managed this program for several years prior to his retirement in 2018.

The attached information is a proposed roadmap for Douglas County to initiate and retain its own CSI unit. The proposed unit would be a civilian corps within the Douglas County Sheriff's Office under direct supervision of the Detectives Division. This proposal describes the CSI unit, job functions and qualifications, and a cost estimate for the initial capital expenses and ongoing employee salaries. Once full time staff is hired and equipment is secured, the Sheriff's Office will consolidate transportation services with this team.

A proposed program description and cost estimates are attached for your review.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Authorize the Sheriff's Department to proceed with the establishment of a civilian based Coroner Scene Investigation Unit.

## Proposed Coroner Scene Investigation Program Description

Douglas County provides Kansas state statute-mandated coroner services to its citizens. These services are delivered through a contracted private partnership with the Kansas City, Kansas firm, Forensics Medical Kansas City. The Douglas County Sheriff's Office maintains a Coroner Scene Investigation Unit consisting of full and part-time civilian staff. The program is administered through the Sheriff Investigation Division.

The primary goal of the program is to assist the coroner in the determination of cause and manner of death for all unattended deaths in Douglas County. This is accomplished through scene investigation, information gathering, witness interviews, and follow-up activities. Investigators are trained and certified through current memberships in the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) and the Kansas Division of International Association for Identification (KDIAI). Continuing education requirements of membership in these organizations will be ongoing.

Coroner investigators work independently from the standard department structure, alongside representatives of other agencies such as law enforcement, district attorneys, hospitals, medical organizations, funeral homes and other coroner jurisdictions, to name a few. Department standard operating procedures (SOPs) guide the specific activities of investigations. Continual program monitoring and evaluation ensure quality investigation and allow for program improvements.

Two full-time employees will work five 8-hour shifts per week. Office hours, when the on-duty CSI is not involved in a scene investigation will be from 7 am to 11 pm, Monday through Friday. All unscheduled hours will be covered with on-call personnel to maintain 24/7 availability of death scene investigators. In the event that no investigators are available due to prior involvement with an ongoing investigation or other unforeseen circumstances, death scene investigators may occasionally be requested from Frontier Medical following established procedures.

The agency operates an adequate, effective, efficient, and safe program directed toward coroner scene investigative operations. The program is appraised through recurring monthly meetings for case review and program updates between all stakeholders, including county and municipal law enforcement representatives, members of the district attorney's office, and representatives from Forensic Medical. The goals of unit reviews include sharing of lessons learned, problem solving, and remaining current with best practices of the profession. Special meetings are convened based on needs, usually associated with updates dealing with forensic practices. The annual appraisal is conducted by the program coordinator and includes evaluation of goals, objectives, training, equipment needs, and program outcomes.

Table 1

Item	Per each	Recommended #	Start-up cost	On-going (annual)
<b>Ford van (<a href="http://ford.com">ford.com</a>)</b>	40,000	2	80,000	
<b>Vehicle conversion (est.)</b>	10,000	2	20,000	
<b>Vehicle maintenance</b>	500/yr	2		1,000
<b>Ferno mortuary cots (<a href="http://funeralsupplystore.com">funeralsupplystore.com</a>)</b>	2,500	2	5,000	
<b>Four body storage unit (<a href="http://MortuaryMall.com">MortuaryMall.com</a>)</b>		1	16,000	
<b>Body bags (<a href="http://funeralsupplystore.com">funeralsupplystore.com</a>)</b>	9.50	100	950	950
<b>Heavy-duty body bags (<a href="http://carolinatarps.com">carolinatarps.com</a>)</b>	40	20	800	800
<b>Body bag security seals (<a href="http://emsstuff.com">emsstuff.com</a>)</b>	20 per 100	1	20	20
<b>Personnel Safety Supplies (<a href="http://envirosafetyproducts.com">envirosafetyproducts.com</a>)</b>				
<b>Nitrile gloves</b>	400 per 1000	1	400	400
<b>Tyvek coveralls</b>	120 per 25	1	120	120
<b>Shoe covers</b>	100 per 200 pairs	1	100	100
<b>Eye protection</b>	2.50	20	50	
<b>N-95 masks</b>	20 per box of 20	5	100	100
<b>Surgical masks</b>	10 per box of 50	2	20	20
<b>Electronic Equipment and Investigator Supplies</b>				
<b>Phones (<a href="http://apple.com">apple.com</a>)</b>	600	4	2,400	
<b>iPads (<a href="http://apple.com">apple.com</a>)</b>	600	4	2,400	
<b>iPad cases (<a href="http://zags.com">zags.com</a>)</b>	150	4	600	
<b>Cameras (<a href="http://getolympus.com">getolympus.com</a>)</b>	450	4	1,800	
<b>SD cards</b>	5.00	40	200	
<b>Flashlights/headlamps (<a href="http://rei.com">rei.com</a>)</b>	50	8	400	
<b>Scene lights (<a href="http://homedepot.com">homedepot.com</a>)</b>	100	2	200	
<b>Desktop computers (<a href="http://dell.com">dell.com</a>)</b>	500	2	1,000	
<b>Misc. office supplies</b>			100	100
<b>Uniforms (<a href="http://uniformwarehouse.com">uniformwarehouse.com</a>)</b>				1,000
<b>Pants</b>	25	30	750	
<b>Polo shirts ss</b>	15	30	450	
<b>Polo shirts ls</b>	25	30	750	
<b>Jackets</b>	30	8	240	
<b>Winter coats</b>	60	8	480	
<b>Shoes</b>	85	8	680	
<b>Reflective vests</b>	20	8	160	
<b>Certification and Training</b>				
<b>ABMDI investigation course</b>	650	4	2600	
<b>ABMDI registry test</b>	400	4	1600	

Item	Per each	Recommended #	Start-up cost	On-going (annual)
ABMDI dues	50	6	300	300
KDIAI membership and dues	15	6	90	90
On-going training and continuing education				2000
<b>Salary costs</b>				
CSI Coordinator (benefits included)	33.74 per hour	40 hours per week		99,510
Coroner Investigator (benefits included)	30.70 per hour	40 hours per week		92,574
On-call coverage (no benefits)	5.00 per hour	83 hours per week		21,580
On-call cases (Numbers based on current yearly average X % of on-call total annual hours.)	30.00 per hour @ 3 hours	50 per year. Approx 1/3 total cases		4,500
<b>Total</b>			140,760	225,164