

AUTOPSY COSTS IN VARIOUS COUNTIES

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TEXAS MEDICAL EXAMINERS

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this report is to determine the operating costs relating to the various Medical Examiners' Offices (ME's) in Texas. Ector County initiated this study by inquiring as to whether Texas Association of Counties (TAC) had any available data on what other counties were paying for the cost of transporting a decedent's body to a facility that performed autopsies. When a death occurs in a county, other than by normal circumstances, the ME or the Justice of the Peace (JP) by contracting with an existing ME is obligated by law to determine the cause of death. All related costs in determining the decedent's death, even transporting the body to the nearest autopsy facility, are incurred by the county. In most instances, counties without ME's must transport the body to a medical facility that is usually out of the county. Since ME's are county agencies, autopsies are generally budgeted in the county budget annually. As counties continue to struggle with budgetary constraints, county officials are also noticing an increase in the cost of autopsies.

This report highlights various operating costs relating to ME's. In addition, the report shows the associated cost for autopsies that were incurred from several counties within the Permian Basin Region, as listed on Table 2. The information in Table 2 was provided to TAC by the Permian Basin Regional Council of Government.

SUMMARY OF MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICES:

- Pursuant to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, section 49.25 – there are 13 Medical Examiner's Offices throughout the state of Texas. The statute requires that counties with a population of more than one million residents shall establish a medical examiner office, while counties with a population of less than one million have the option of establishing an ME.
- These 13 ME's offices are located in fifteen of the state's largest counties. Based on the Texas State Data Center – Estimates for January 2005, the total population in these fifteen counties is approximately 13.1 million, which is 58.1% of the state's entire population.
- Counties without ME's offices (239) use the Justice of the Peace (JP) as the official signer on the death certificate or contract the duties of an ME to the nearest medical school or to a neighboring county that has an ME's office.
- Texas has no oversight State ME's agency, Medical Examiners are appointed locally by the County Commissioners Court. Medical Examiners and physicians are licensed by the State Board of Medical Examiners.

METHODOLOGY:

- All 13 ME's were contacted via phone or email. In several cases, the county auditor' offices were contacted as well. Table 2, the Permian Basin Regional Council of Governments (COG's) provided the list of information relating to the other 19 counties and their prospective cost for an autopsy.

RESULTS:

- Based on the collection of data from the various ME's, the average charge for an autopsy is \$1,248; while the average charge for transporting a body is \$131.

TABLE 1. STATISTICAL COSTS AND DATA ON MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICES

Fiscal Year 2004

Medical Examiners' Offices	Total Number of Autopsies Performed Yearly (including partial)	Departmental Annual Budget	Number of Employees	Cost/Fees per Autopsy (Testimony Fees)	Cost for Transporting per Body
Bexar County	2,056	\$3,427,000	40	\$1,500	Contract -\$45
Collin County	1,640	\$760,611	5	\$1,000*	\$125 - \$150
Dallas County	3,086	\$4,146,848	45	\$1,500	\$80 - \$110**
Ector County	65	\$333,000	3	\$1,200	\$325
El Paso County	2,651	\$745,369	13	\$500	\$50
Galveston County (UTMB)	887	\$569,064	8	\$2,000	Contract
Harris County	3,790	\$13,106,000	146	\$2,125	Contract
Johnson County (located at Harris -Walls Regional Hospital)	107	\$189,000	5.5	\$1,100 - \$1,300	No cost
Lubbock County	***	***	12	\$2,500 - \$3,000	***
Nueces County	428	\$602,396	6	\$1,100 - \$1,850	\$100
Tarrant, Parker, and Denton Counties	1,042	\$5,000,000*	50	\$1,200	\$70 (only for Tarrant county)
Travis County	2,841	\$2,168,984	23	\$1,600/ (\$3,500)	\$125
Wichita County	100	\$200,000*	2	\$975 - \$1,575	\$200-\$300

* Only an estimated amount

** If body is over 300 lbs the charge is \$110.

*** Information is not available

Table 2. Permian Basin Region Autopsy Data

Fiscal Year 2005

County Name	Number of Autopsies Performed	Transported to the city	Institution Performing the Autopsy	Yearly Cost	Transportation Cost	Total	Average Cost
Andrews	7	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$10,270.00	\$810.00	\$11,080.00	\$1,582.00
Borden	2	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$2,700.00	\$200.00	\$2,900.00	\$1,450.00
Crane	3	Ft. Worth and Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$13,224.00		\$13,224.00	\$1,655.00
Dawson	5	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$7,718.00	\$1,153.00	\$8,871.00	\$1,774.00
Gaines	7	Big Spring and Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$8,700.00	\$990.00	\$9,690.00	\$1,384.00
Glasscock	1		Div. of Forensic Pathology	\$1,360.00	\$273.00	\$1,633.00	\$1,633.00
Loving	0						
Martin	2	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$2,940.00	\$696.00	\$3,636.00	\$1,818.00
Pecos	6	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$8,738.00	\$4,371.00	\$13,109.00	\$2,184.00
Reeves	11	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$13,853.00		\$13,853.00	
Reeves		El Paso	Juan U Castro	\$1,000.00		\$1,000.00	
Reeves				\$14,853.00	\$4,225.00	\$19,078.00	\$1,734.00
Terrell	0						
Upton	6	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$8,553.00	\$3,842.00	\$13,395.00	\$2,065.00
Ward	5	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$7,301.00	\$2,245.00	\$9,546.00	\$1,909.00
Winker	5	Lubbock	Texas Tech	\$6,900.00	\$2,535.00	\$9,435.00	\$1,887.00
Ector	54	Austin, Ft Worth, and Lubbock		\$90,537.00	\$19,071.00	\$109,609.00	\$2,029.00
Howard	16	Lubbock		\$22,328.00	\$5,201.00	\$27,529.00	\$1,720.00
Midland	53	Dallas and Lubbock	Dallas Co. SW and Texas Tech	\$79,381.00			\$1,497.00
Total	183			\$300,356.00	\$45,612.00	\$267,588.00	\$1,640.00