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FINDINGS

1. A Sheriff-Coroner Investigator referred a specific service provider.
2. The Grand Jury determined that no policy prohibits the referral of a specific cleanup company. Such conduct prohibiting the referral of a specific vendor is addressed verbally in Sheriff-Coroner initial training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 14-1 Include specific language in the Code of Ethics prohibiting recommendation of a specific service provider while representing the Sheriff-Coroner Department. (Findings 1, 2)
- 14-2 Conduct additional training expressing the Sheriff-Coroner Department's position on this subject. (Findings 1, 2)

<u>Responding Agency</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>	<u>Due Date</u>
San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner	14-1 and 14-2	10/01/14

SHERIFF-CORONER DEPARTMENT MOBILE COMMAND UNIT

BACKGROUND

San Bernardino County is the largest county in the USA. As of the 2010 census the population was 2,035,210. The county occupies 201,105 square miles. San Bernardino County is larger than nine (9) states and 71 sovereign nations. Geographically, the county has snowcapped mountains, arid desert, numerous lakes and rivers and a major earthquake fault. The county includes hundreds of miles of freeways and highways. San Bernardino County contains several airports including Ontario International Airport. San Bernardino County Sheriff/Coroner Department (Coroner Division) works to provide decedents and their families with utmost professional service.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with members of the Coroner Division with emphasis on departmental policies and procedures and on equipment.

FACTS

The stated primary objective of the Coroner Division is “to recover remains in a dignified and respectful manner while ensuring the integrity of the victim’s identification.” Division personnel are especially mindful of their responsibilities in a mass fatality event. Additionally, the medico-legal death investigation must be initiated promptly, and the related site must be processed properly.

A review of Coroner Division records revealed the following: When deputy coroners are dispatched to a scene they must share a communication post with the California Office of Emergency Services, CHP, San Bernardino County Fire or San Bernardino County Sheriff law enforcement units. Since the Coroner Division does not have a Mobile Command Post of their own permission is given to share mobile command post facilities only when space is available. The San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner is the Office of Emergency Services (OES) Region 6 Coroner Mutual Aid Coordinator; as such, he is tasked to lead supporting adjacent counties in a mass fatality event. Coroner staff including pathologists, anthropologist, investigators, autopsy assistants, DNA scientists and volunteers are required to work in areas in view by the public.

According to information received from the Coroner Division, four recent events demonstrate the need for a mobile command post:

February 3, 2013: A tour bus crashed on State Route 38 just north of Yucaipa. It was initially believed there were 30 fatalities. The actual death toll was eight. Decedent body parts were badly damaged making identification difficult. Decedent property was strewn over at least a quarter mile. The Coroners Department is responsible for decedent property. This was a multi-agency event (County Fire, Yucaipa Sheriff Station, CHP, the National Transportation Safety Board, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Coroner Division). Only the CHP had a command post which was primarily used by their investigators.

The temperature on this date was in the 40's with mild winds. Though the cold did not affect the recovery, usually there is snow on the ground. Media helicopters were overhead and media were along the roadside; coroner staff had no place to privately discuss the investigation. Hand-held radio communication was ineffective. Excessive noise from fire trucks and equipment made cell phone communication difficult.

February 12, 2013: Christopher Dorner died in a basement of a home in a remote area off State Route 38. The investigation involved Sheriff's Specialized Investigation Division, Sheriff's Scientific Identification Division, Coroner Division and County Fire. The Specialized Investigations' command post was on scene, but crowded. Coroners were able to communicate, but had nowhere to lay out their equipment, meet and discuss assignments or communicate with off-site managers in a private manner.

The weather was inclement, there were several inches of snow on the ground and the air was damp and cold. The temperature was estimated in the 20's. Recovery was conducted in several inches of water and ash. Coroner investigators were required to don overalls and boots, but no safe or warm place to remove them when their work was completed. The event was manageable because most of their work occurred at night and involved other Sheriff Divisions. Had the event occurred midday, with a greater media presence, or in an area serviced by a city police department, the support received by Coroner staff would likely have been insufficient.

September 3, 2013: Skeletal human remains were found in a clandestine grave in the open desert in the county area outside Victorville. The recovery was made by Sheriff's Specialized Investigations Division, a crime scene specialist, Coroner investigators, volunteers and a forensic anthropologist under contract with the Coroner. Temperatures were near or above 100 degrees during this daytime recovery. Little shelter or cool air was available. A single command post was insufficient for the number of people working on the recovery.

November 11, 2013: The skeletal remains of two adults and two children were recovered from clandestine graves off of Interstate 15 in the high desert. The recovery was made by Sheriff's Specialized Investigations, a Sheriff crime scene specialist, Coroner investigators and a forensic anthropologist under contract with the Coroner. Temperatures were moderate. There were limited indoor restroom facilities. Only the Specialized Investigations' mobile command post was available. The media presence was significant, with numerous reporters and