



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 6/16/2026

File #: 26-420

To: Board of Supervisors

From: Sheriff

Agenda Section: Consent

Vote Requirement: Majority

SUBJECT:

Update on Autopsy Services and Professional Services Agreement with Bennet Omalu Pathology, NorCal Inc.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Approve the Professional Services Agreement with Bennet Omalu Pathology, NorCal Inc. ("Dr. Omalu") for Autopsy Services (Attachment 1); and
2. Direct staff to return in July 2026 with a Fiscal Year 2026-27 budget adjustment in the amount of \$72,872 for this Agreement.

STRATEGIC PLAN:

This action supports the following areas of your Board's Strategic Plan.

Area of Focus: Core Services/Other

Strategic Plan Category: 9999 - Core Services/Other

DISCUSSION:

In 2015, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the consolidation of the Coroner Office with the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO). Since that time, the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office Coroner Division (Coroner Division) has been responsible for conducting death investigations throughout Humboldt County. The division is staffed by four full time Deputy Coroners and one Sheriff's Sergeant, that are responsible for responding to and investigating deaths that fall under the jurisdiction of the Coroner.

Humboldt County is now facing a critical challenge in maintaining legally required forensic pathology and autopsy services. California Government Code Section 27491 requires the Coroner to investigate certain deaths, including unnatural deaths, deaths where the attending physician cannot determine the cause of death and deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician within the required time period before death. The Coroner Division is responsible for establishing the identity of the deceased, the date, time, and place of death and the cause and manner of death.

Each year, approximately 800 deaths are reported to the Coroner Division for review. While not every death requires an autopsy, an autopsy or postmortem examination is necessary when the cause of death cannot otherwise be determined, or when the death is unexpected, suspicious, accidental, suicidal, homicidal, or otherwise legally requires further inquiry. In all cases, a death certificate requires a cause of death determined by a licensed physician.

For decades, Humboldt County has relied on a contracted physician and contracted forensic pathologists to perform these essential services. This model has allowed the county to meet its legal obligations in a practical and cost-effective manner. Historically, the county used a licensed physician to conduct postmortem examinations in noncriminal cases, many of which involved natural or accidental deaths. These examinations were less intrusive when appropriate and considered the decedent's medical history, x rays, external and internal examinations, toxicology, and the circumstances surrounding the death. Over the last five years, Humboldt County has averaged approximately 200 postmortem examinations per year.

When forensic certification was required, the county relied on contracted forensic pathologists who traveled to Humboldt County to perform forensic autopsies. However, this model is no longer reliable. In early 2025, the Coroner Division was notified that our contracted forensic pathologist was no longer available due to medical issues. HCSO immediately began searching for a replacement. That search confirmed what many rural counties across California are also experiencing: there are not enough California licensed forensic pathologists available to provide essential autopsy services to rural counties.

The Coroner Division attempted to identify local or regional providers who could assume the county's caseload. Only one pathologist was identified who expressed interest in traveling to Humboldt County from Sacramento, but that pathologist's schedule could not accommodate Humboldt County's workload. The Coroner Division also reached out to local medical providers to determine whether a local forensic pathologist could be identified and contracted to perform autopsies for the county. No local pathologist was available or interested.

In the absence of a regular forensic pathology contract, HCSO has had to rely on NAAG Forensic PC to conduct forensic autopsies on an as needed basis. While this has provided a temporary option, it is not a sustainable long-term solution. NAAG has minimum fees, and the county is required to pay travel and accommodation costs when their services are used. This results in significant unbudgeted costs and creates uncertainty in a service area where the county cannot afford delays or gaps.

Due to necessity, HCSO has requested mutual aid through Mendocino County when a forensic autopsy is required. In those cases, a Deputy Coroner must transport the decedent to the Mendocino County Coroner's Office, where the autopsy is performed by Dr. Bennet Omalu. Mendocino County then passes the cost of the autopsy on to Humboldt County. While HCSO appreciates Mendocino County's assistance, relying on another county for this core legal function is not an appropriate long-term solution for Humboldt County.

HCSO has now identified Dr. Bennet Omalu and Bennet Omalu Pathology as the most reasonable and reliable option to provide forensic pathology services for Humboldt County. Dr. Omalu is a highly respected forensic pathologist who has provided Coroner related services for several counties in California, including Mendocino County.

The proposed contract would change the county's current process. Under the proposal, Bennet Omalu Pathology would provide comprehensive autopsy and postmortem examination services. A forensic pathologist would travel to the Coroner Division on a weekly basis to conduct both forensic and non-forensic examinations. Bennet Omalu Pathology would also provide trained autopsy technicians to assist with these examinations.

The cost of this contract is significantly higher than the Coroner Division's current autopsy budget. However, the increased cost is directly related to the change in the available service model. The county can no longer rely on a lower cost local physician for postmortem examinations while separately contracting with forensic pathologists only when needed. The available provider model requires a more comprehensive service agreement, and HCSO has been unable to identify a practical, qualified, and legally sufficient alternative.

Although the proposal increases costs, it also provides the county with stability, consistency and legal compliance. It reduces the need to transport decedents out of county, reduces delays for families, provides more predictable forensic pathology coverage, and strengthens the independence and credibility of death investigations. This is especially important in cases involving homicides, officer involved incidents, in custody deaths, child deaths, suspicious deaths, overdoses, and other cases where accuracy, transparency and public trust are essential.

The Coroner Division performs one of the most serious and sensitive functions of county government. Families depend on the Coroner for answers. Law enforcement agencies depend on the Coroner for accurate death determinations. Prosecutors and courts depend on the Coroner for reliable forensic findings. The public depends on an independent and professional death investigation

process. Without reliable forensic pathology services, the county risks delays in death certificates, delays in criminal investigations, increased costs through emergency outsourcing and diminished confidence in the death investigation process.

For these reasons, HCSO respectfully requests that the Board approve the increased cost of funding needed as explained in the financial section in order to enter into a contract with Bennet Omalu Pathology effective July 1, 2026. Given the timing of contract signing with the new fiscal year, HCSO is requesting the Board to direct staff to return in July for the supplemental budget needed for Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-27. This contract is the only reasonable and sustainable option currently available to ensure Humboldt County maintains compliance with policies, procedures and the law.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

General Fund (1100-272)

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

<i>Expenditures (1100,272)</i>	FY26-27	FY27-28 Projected*	FY28-29 Projected*
<i>Budgeted Expenses</i>	<u>\$677,128</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>
<i>Additional Appropriation Requested</i>	<u>\$72,872</u>	<u>\$0</u>	<u>\$0</u>
<i>Total Expenditures</i>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>

**Projected amounts are estimates and are subject to change.*

<i>Funding Sources (1100, 272)</i>	FY26-27	FY27-28 Projected*	FY28-29 Projected*
<i>General Fund</i>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$677,128</u>	<u>\$677,128</u>
<i>Opioid Settlement Funds Proposal</i>	<u>\$0</u>	<u>\$72,872</u>	<u>\$72,872</u>
<i>Total Funding Sources</i>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>	<u>\$750,000</u>

**Projected amounts are estimates and are subject to change.*

Narrative Explanation of Financial Impact:

The contract with Bennet Omalu Pathology is full-service for forensic and non-forensic autopsies, medical reviews, and pathology. Historically the Coroner Division has contracted with multiple vendors for these services. For FY 2026-27, from the allocated General Fund contribution, the Coroner Division has budgeted \$31,000 for pathology, \$130,000 for non-forensic autopsies, and \$136,128 for forensic autopsies for a total of \$297,128. With the new contract, the Coroner Division would only utilize Bennet Omalu Pathology for these services resulting in the \$297,128 going towards the new contract. An additional \$380,000 of general fund appropriations from other HCSO budget units' General Fund allocation has been moved to the Coroner Division budget to help cover the cost of this contract, for a total of \$677,128 of existing General Fund allocation towards this contract.

HCSO is requesting an additional \$72,872 as a one-time General Fund allocation in FY 2026-27 to the Coroner Division for these services. Should your Board approve this new agreement, then HCSO would return to your Board in July to request a budget adjustment for FY 2026-27.

For future years, HCSO will submit a proposal to the Opioid Settlement Workgroup for funding for increased toxicology report expenditures. This is a funding source that other counties are currently using.

STAFFING IMPACT:

There is no impact on staffing. This is currently a contracted service, and it is recommended to continue being a contracted service.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

None.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Your Board may choose not to approve the contract with Dr. Omalu. This is not recommended as there are no other viable alternatives for forensic autopsy services to be provided in Humboldt County.

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ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 - Professional Services Agreement with Bennet Omalu Pathology, NorCal Inc.

PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:

Meeting of: N/A

File No.: N/A