



PRESS RELEASE

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY Sheriff-Coroner

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Sheriff-Coroner

Coroner Unit – Then and Now



Although the County is policed by several different law enforcement agencies, the Sheriff's Office is mandated to investigate and determine the cause and manner of deaths for nearly everyone who dies in the county. In instances of criminal, accidental, suicidal, or sudden unexplained natural deaths, the responsibility to solve these mysteries falls to Forensic Pathologist, Dr. Stephany Fiore, and her team of Coroner Detectives.

Many Hollywood shows dramatize this type of work but for our Coroner Unit this real life assignment is part investigation and part compassion. The help Dr. Fiore and her Detectives provide to loved-ones affected by tragedy is immeasurable.

Our Coroner Unit has evolved over the years from forensic examinations conducted by pathologists at local mortuaries, to the use of the County Morgue at the Emeline Health Center in the 1980's (pictured above), to our recent move to Sheriff's Office Headquarters located at 5200 Soquel Ave. We have evolved over time and are proud of the service we are currently able to provide; not just with our new morgue facility, but with our new Forensic Pathologist and the recent acquisition of x-ray equipment.

In 2013, Dr. Stephany Fiore came to us from the Sacramento County Coroner's Office where she was the Chief Pathologist. Dr. Fiore has conducted well over 6,000 autopsies and has a wealth of knowledge with regards to forensic and neuropathology. Dr. Fiore said, "I enjoy solving mysteries. Performing an autopsy to determine cause of death is essentially solving the mystery of why someone passes away. It involves gathering and

analyzing clues and coming up with the most likely explanation for what happened. I also enjoy helping families understand why their loved one is no longer with them. It helps with their grief and allows them to achieve closure.”

Dr. Fiore received her education from San Jose State, St. Louis University and University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. She gained her specialty training in forensic pathology and neuropathology from the Sacramento County Coroner’s Office and at the New York Medical Examiner’s Office during the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Dr. Fiore said she enjoys Santa Cruz County and being closer to family who also reside in the area. She said the relatively slower pace here as compared to Sacramento, has given her time to focus on more community-based projects. She is currently working with other health care professionals to see how our county is affected by the opioid epidemic that is facing the nation by taking a detailed look at our drug-related deaths and helping to find ways we can better address these issues.

Dr. Fiore and her team use many tools. Recently, they acquired an x-ray machine to help provide more information. Until now, x-rays were primarily used for homicide victims and were done at a separate county facility. Dr. Fiore said, “Now we have the ability to better document bone injuries on all manners of death, such as motor vehicle accidents and falls.” In addition to providing more information, the x-ray equipment gives the Coroner Unit the ability to better support various religious preferences. “Sometimes families would prefer that an autopsy not be performed due to religious objection. In these cases, we now have the ability to document bone trauma in motor vehicle accidents and falls without having to cut open the body. Depending on the circumstances and extent of trauma, this may allow us to perform an external examination instead of a full autopsy while not losing information needed to determine cause of death”

“Another limitation of not having in-house x-ray comes when hunting down wayward bullets,” Dr. Fiore said. “Bullets can take unusual paths and can sometimes be tricky to find. This particularly happens when they enter hollow structures like the aorta or the gastrointestinal system. I had a case once where the decedent was shot in the chest and the bullet entered the esophagus but ended up lodged inside the colon by the appendix. This would never have been figured out without x-ray.”

Our Coroner Unit has come a long way over the years. From our prior facility at Emeline to our new morgue, equipment and expertise, this is only a small example of the great amount of work our Coroner Unit and Office does. We strive to provide the best service we can to those in our beautiful County and thank everyone who have helped us achieve this level of service.

