



County's first Homeless Death Review Committee issues inaugural report

SANTA ANA, Ca. (Feb. 27, 2023): Orange County's first Homeless Death Review Committee issued its inaugural report today, reviewing deaths of people experiencing homelessness in 2021. The report's findings show that deaths among people experiencing homelessness have risen substantially over the last decade, from 103 in 2012 to 395 in 2021, and that the leading cause of death is drug-related, with fentanyl as a factor in 144 of the deaths.

The Coroner Division of the Orange County Sheriff's Department led the Homeless Death Review Committee, commissioned by Orange County Sheriff Don Barnes in January 2022. The Committee includes broad representation of technical experts from county agencies, municipal police departments, hospitals, and non-profits. The Committee has met multiple times since March 2022 to explore the root causes of homeless deaths to determine what, if any, factors contributing to the deaths were preventable.

In addition to the increase in the total number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness, the Committee found that accidental deaths became the leading manner of death in 2020, surpassing natural deaths. Of the 235 accidental deaths, 76 percent were drug-related, with fentanyl as a factor in more than three-quarters of the drug-related deaths. The Committee also looked at the number of decedents with at least one experience in the Orange County Jail, finding that 309 of the 395 had at least one episode in custody within the last five years.

"The findings by the Homeless Death Review Committee are telling, and it's clear that we have challenges ahead to reduce the number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness," said Sheriff Barnes. "The rise in the number of deaths of people experiencing homelessness is concerning. Most troubling is the significant increase we are seeing in fentanyl-related deaths.

"We continue to enhance efforts to address the fentanyl epidemic and provide critical resources to those trapped in addiction. It will be imperative that we also look at the clear correlation between incarceration of people experiencing homelessness and work to increase the number of people taking advantage of programs while they are in custody.

"In addition to drug-related death increases, the rates of suicide and homicide among individuals in this population are significantly higher than national averages. What this demonstrates is people experiencing homelessness are subject to higher rates of crime and suicide. Mental illness among people experiencing homelessness may be a contributing factor to suicides. During the Committee's review of 2022 data, I will ask that they review and present recommendations on these two areas of concern."

The Committee provided recommendations based on their findings. Chief among the recommendations is for legislation to be enacted to enable full sharing of data, allowing the committee to complete a case-by-case review of each death instead of relying on aggregate data. To rectify this barrier, Sheriff Barnes is sponsoring legislation authored by Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva, AB 271, which will permit data sharing among mortality review committees.

"Going forward the Homeless Death Review Committee will continue to meet and identify opportunities to reduce preventable deaths," said Sheriff Barnes. "I appreciate the Committee's commitment to the value of each life and know that their work will result in a positive difference."

[Click here to read the Report on 2021 Orange County Homeless Deaths.](#)