

# EL PASO COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER RECRUITMENT



7/25/2011

Internal Recruitment Committee Report

# El Paso County Medical Examiner Recruitment

## COMMITTEE REPORT

### **PURPOSE OF COMMITTEE**

In August, 2010, a committee was formed to conduct the first phase of interviews with several medical examiner candidates. It has since transformed into an analysis committee to review the difficulties with getting qualified candidates to remain in the recruitment process to the point of selection and acceptance of an offer of employment.

### **COMPOSITION OF COMMITTEE**

The first interview committee consisted of Commissioner Dan Haggerty, Commissioner Anna Perez, County Auditor Edward Dion, Public Defender Clara Hernandez, District Attorney Jaime Esparza, William Ellis, CAO, Sheriff's Office, Dr. Harry Wilson, and Private Attorney Duane Baker. Non-voting members were County Attorney Jo Anne Bernal and HR Director Betsy Keller.

The committee that conducted the analysis to compile this report included Commissioner Dan Haggerty, Commissioner Anna Perez, Interim Medical Examiner Dr. Juan Contin, Public Defender Clara Hernandez, District Attorney Jaime Esparza, County Attorney Jo Anne Bernal, Public Policy Director Ruben Vogt, and HR Director Betsy Keller.

### **BACKGROUND**

Recruiting medical examiners is a challenge nationwide. There are an estimated 400 to 450 certified pathologists in our country. There are approximately 350 medical examiners' offices plus many hospitals competing for their services.

The committee began its work in August, 2010. The original committee conducted telephonic interviews with several candidates. Four finalists were selected to proceed to the next phase. However, these finalists withdrew from consideration and gave various reasons. One candidate from the original group provided reasons they believed it would be difficult for the County to recruit a qualified candidate. County Judge Veronica Escobar asked that HR analyze the difficulties facing the recruitment and include some of the internal members from the committee and include a representative from the County Judge's office.

## ANALYSIS

The committee analyzed multiple aspects of the recruitment and the department. It reviewed the job description, the pay for the position, the department operating budget, the staffing levels for the department, the public relations work requirements, the lack of NAME accreditation, the reporting structure and interaction with Commissioners Court that is required, and the process for receiving, investigating, and responding to complaints concerning the Medical Examiner.

## FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. One missing aspect of best practices for medical examiner's offices that contributes to the unattractiveness of the office is the lack of accreditation through the National Association of Medical Examiners. Candidates know that NAME accredited offices demand and meet the minimum standards that define the fundamental services rendered by a professional medical examiner's office. The committee also reviewed the resources that would be needed to become NAME certified with Staff from the Medical Examiner's Office. Directly the cost for NAME certification is \$5,000 the first year and \$1,000 each year thereafter.
2. The need for resources for accreditation was further illustrated through the feedback received from the candidates who had withdrawn. The main concern the committee found was the lack of resources the office has to offer a qualified candidate in the way of the department's staffing and operating budget. Several medical examiners were contacted and multiple responses identified this as a concern in the medical examiner community. The need for 2.5 to 3 medical examiners was emphasized based on the caseload this office is expected to handle. With the need for additional doctors comes the need for additional support staff, training, and equipment. Discussions were also held with Dr. Juan Contin, Irene Santiago, and Annabel Salazar from the office concerning staffing levels and needs. Furthermore, the committee identified areas and functions where staffing is needed for the department to perform more effectively. The Chief Medical Examiner job description was modified to allow candidates with four or more years of experience plus have or be eligible to sit and obtain board certification in Anatomic and Forensic Pathology to be considered for the position. The Deputy Medical Examiner position's pay was examined against market rates and is believed to be higher than necessary to attract candidates for this position in order to distribute the caseload more reasonably.

Overall, the staffing budget is recommended to be increased by \$230,617 to meet the recommended staffing level. This includes the recommended staffing changes which are: taking 2 part-time investigators (1 part-time position is currently frozen in the budget) and making 1 full-time investigator position; unfreezing 1 office specialist, intermediate position to serve as the department receptionist and provide administrative

support; and adding 1 chief deputy investigator, 1 quality assurance/operations supervisor, 1 records custodian, 1 transcriptionist, and 2 diener positions. It also includes the changes to have 1.725 FTE deputy medical examiners in addition to the Chief Medical Examiner.

The operating budget was examined and compared to other offices. The committee found the operating budget is minimal compared to similar size entities. The recommendation is to increase the operating budget by \$247,200 in Fiscal Year 2012. This includes the following increases: \$200,000 for toxicology and testing; \$38,200 for training (to get and keep all licenses & certifications required for accreditation); \$4,000 for memberships & subscriptions; and the \$5,000 for accreditation application and pre-inspection consultations. Additional funding would be needed for capital equipment in an approximate amount of \$124,000 for equipment such as microscopes, tools, hardware for security system upgrades, etc.

**The total recommended investment to work towards accreditation and attracting more qualified candidates is \$477,817 from general fund and \$124,000 from capital funds.**

3. Another concern identified through research and discussions with candidates includes the challenges of the position reporting to a political body that may not have the expertise in the medical profession to adequately and fairly review complaints for validity and corrective action. These are not unique issues to El Paso County. Nationwide medical examiners report to governing bodies that are not comprised of medical experts. The committee reviewed the statute governing medical examiners in Texas and reviewed 2 models of different structures, which seem to face their own structural challenges. A need for a countywide complaint procedure was discussed as well as ways these complaints could be fairly investigated and handled. The committee found that this needs to be addressed countywide and separately from the recruitment process for the medical examiner. It is recommended that a committee be formed to research the need for a more formalized citizen's complaint process and it bring back recommendations to the Court on what processes should be utilized on a general complaint and on complaints concerning specialized professions (medical, practice of law, etc.).
4. Another concern is the recruitment practices utilized to select and make an offer to a successful candidate. It was reviewed that in the normal recruitment of medical professionals, the top candidates are brought in along with their spouses, if applicable. The candidates are provided with community tours by relocation specialists from the area, introduced to the medical community, and made aware of what all El Paso has to offer. Additionally, it is common practice for the candidate selected to be provided some stipend to offset relocation expenses. Finally, a small amount of funding is needed to advertise in conference and general brochures and media that are specific to the

medical examiner market. The total budget for these recruiting efforts is estimated at less than \$25,000, which is less than was originally planned for hiring a physician recruitment firm.