



# Huerfano County Coroner 2022 Annual Report

Vonnie Valdez – Coroner

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Compiled by Vonnie Valdez and Abigail Manus

Cover Photo Curtesy of Norma Mower

# FOREWORD

The Coroner and staff recognize the tragedy surrounding an untimely death and perform investigations, in part, to assist the grieving family. A complete forensic investigation provides the cause and manner of how an individual died. Moreover, the investigation assists in settling insurance and estate claims, as well as the implementation of civil and criminal actions. Questions which seem irrelevant in the initial hours after a death may become significant in the following months. The surviving family and general public can have peace of mind knowing that a thorough investigation was conducted. The Coroner's Office works in cooperation with the law enforcement community but conducts a separate and unbiased investigation.

Although criminal death investigations constitute a small portion of deaths investigated by the Office of the Coroner, these deaths are studied in great detail because of the issues and legal consequences involved. In this way, the criminal justice system is offered the best support and public health is apprised of any relevant dangers that may exist. In a criminal case, evidence would be presented in Court that provides the cause and manner of death. Where public health is concerned, our office may, for example, identify an infectious agent or poison implicated in a death, and hence, the family and persons recently in physical contact with the deceased are notified so they might receive any necessary medical treatment.



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## DUTIES OF THE CORONER'S OFFICE

The Coroner's Office is a statutory office, mandated by the Colorado Constitution and the Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) 30-10-601 through 621. Under these Statutes, the Coroner's primary role is to make the proper inquiry regarding the cause and manner of death of any person who dies within the jurisdiction of the office.

Types of Deaths that are reported to the Coroner:

- No physician in attendance.
- The attending physician is unable or unwilling to certify the cause of death.
- The attending physician has not been in actual attendance within the past 30 days prior to death.
- All cases in which trauma may be associated with the death, such as traffic accidents, gunshots, falls, etc. This includes inpatients who have sustained fractures any time in the past.
- Deaths by poisoning, suspected poisoning, chemical or bacterial materials, industrial hazardous material or radiation.
- Known or suspected suicides.
- Deaths due to self-induced or unexplained abortion.
- Operating room deaths and deaths that occur during a medical procedure.
- All unexplained deaths (deaths that occur in apparently healthy individuals).
- Deaths that occur within 24 hours of admission to an emergency room, hospital or nursing care facility/hospice.
- Deaths in the custody of law enforcement.
- Deaths of persons in the care of a public institution.



Deaths meeting the above criteria are investigated by the Coroner, and if during the investigation, it is determined that an autopsy is necessary, then autopsies are performed by Board Certified Forensic Pathologists. The result of the investigation determines final cause and manner of death.

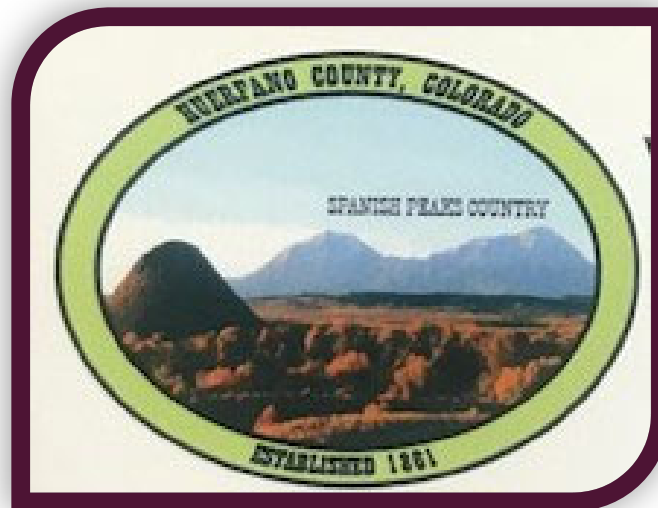
The cause of death is defined as the disease or injury that resulted in the death of an individual. The manner of death is ruled as one of the following: Natural, Accident, Homicide, Suicide or Undetermined. Undetermined Manner of Death includes deaths in which manner could not clearly be determined, as an example when skeletal remains are found and no apparent trauma is



found during examination. Undetermined is also used with Sudden Unexpected Infant Death, and when no other clear manner of death can be determined.

In addition, associated responsibilities of the Coroner's Office include but are not limited to:

- Legal pronouncement of death
- Legal identification of the deceased
- Take custody of the body and personal belongings
- Legal identification and notification Next of Kin
- Discovery of remains
- Certifies death certificates
- Oversees Green Burials and Private Cemetery Processes
- Helping families understand the actions of the Coroner's office and the process after a death occurs

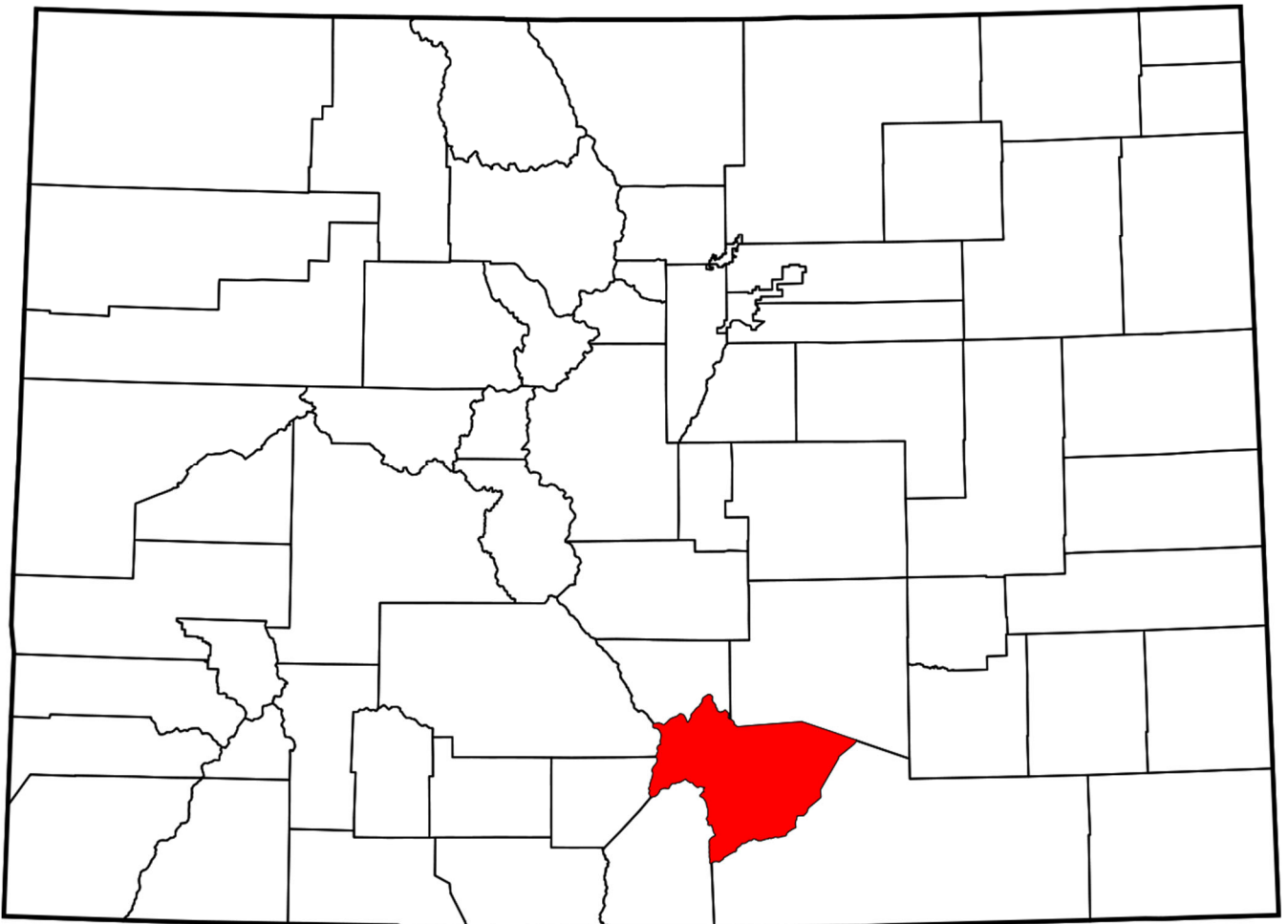


## HUERFANO COUNTY JURISDICTION

The information presented in this report was compiled based on deaths which came under the jurisdiction of the Huerfano County Coroner's Office during the calendar year of 2022.

The geographical area served by the Huerfano County Coroner's Office includes 1,593 square miles of Huerfano County, bordered by Pueblo to the northeast, Custer to the northwest, Las Animas to the southeast, Costilla to the southwest, and Alamosa and Saguache to the west. Huerfano is the 30<sup>th</sup> largest Colorado county in area.

Information obtained from the United States Census Bureau shows that the population of Huerfano County as of April 2020 to be approximately 6,917. This makes Huerfano county the 44<sup>th</sup> largest county by population in Colorado.



## Huerfano County



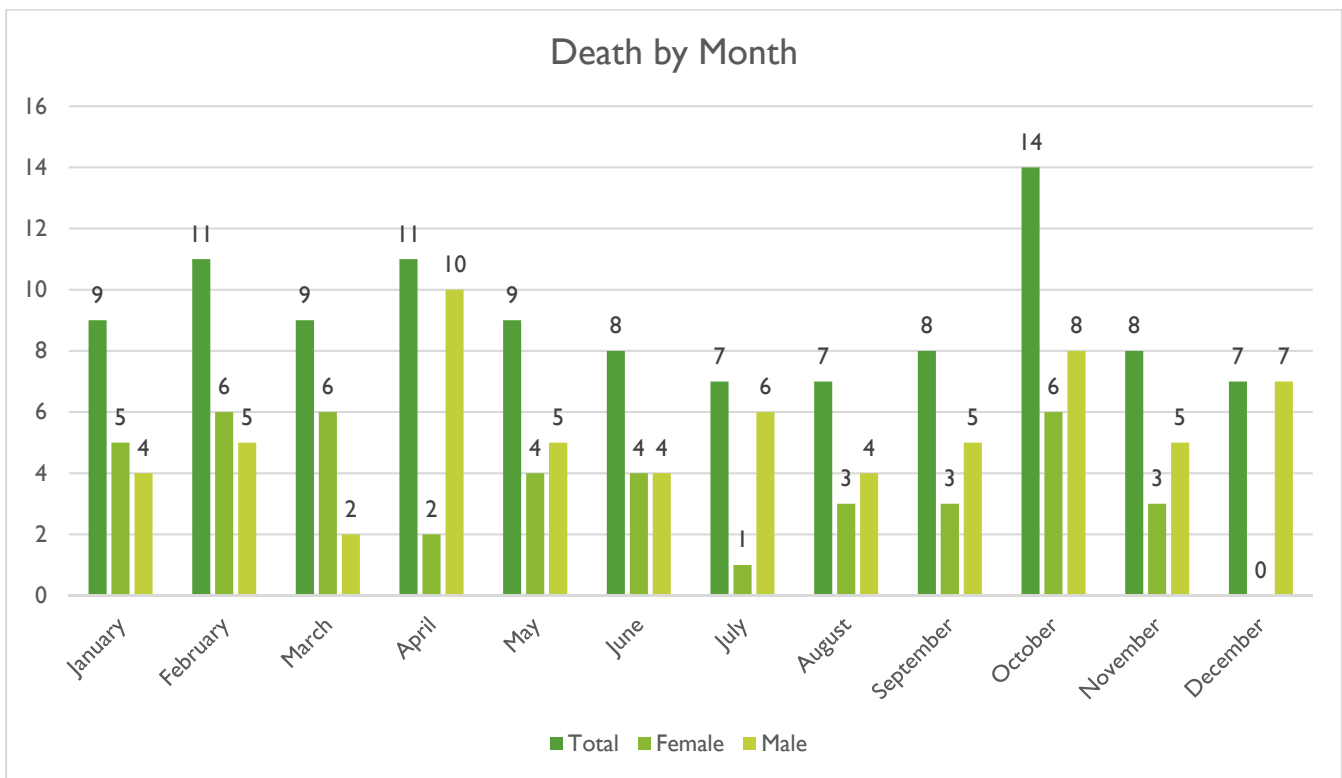
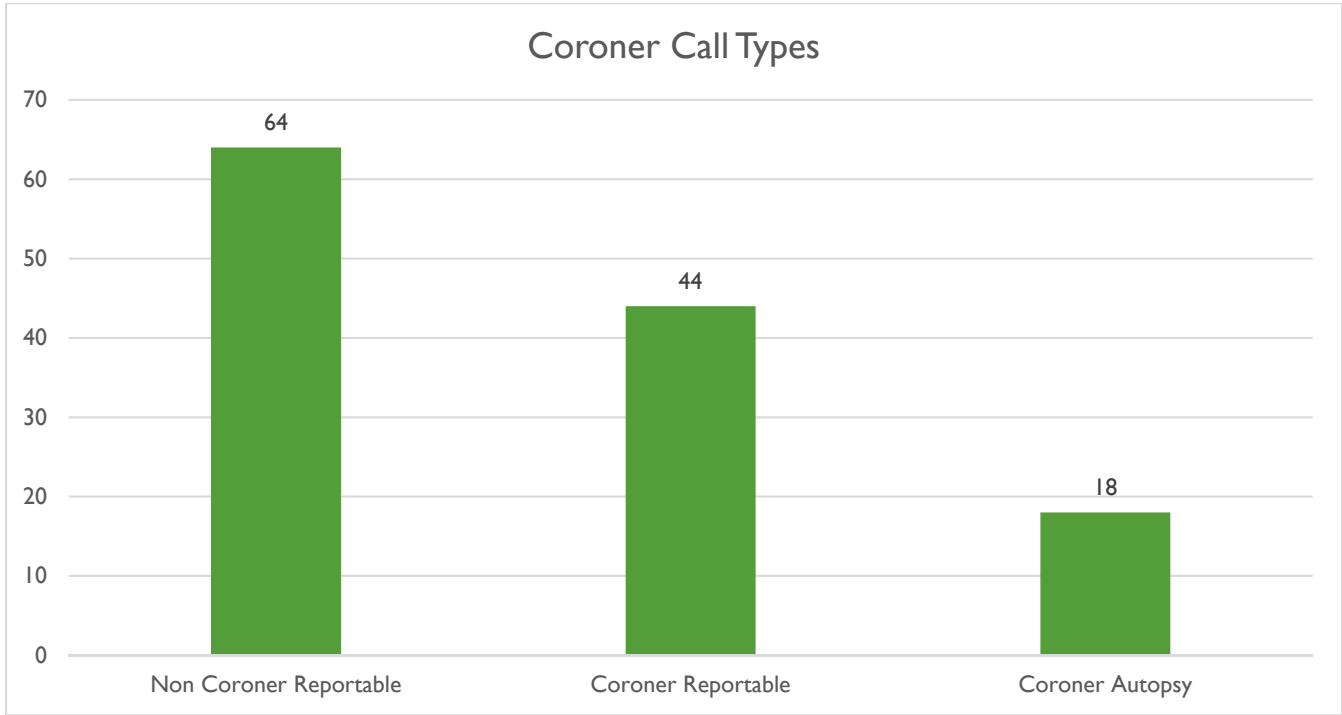
### DEATHS IN 2022

The overall caseload for 2022 was 108 cases, reported by law enforcement, medical personnel or another Coroner's Office. This included 44 reportable deaths, of which 18 of the cases required autopsies. There was 1 transfer of jurisdiction cases that were referred back to Huerfano County per Colorado House Bill 13-1097. This Bill states that the jurisdiction of a case is determined by where the initial incident occurred that led to the death. Of the cases referred back to Huerfano County, it came from El Paso County.

In cases where jurisdiction was not assumed by the Coroner, a local physician, with knowledge and awareness of the deceased's state of health, certified the death. These were predominately natural deaths, predominantly in medical facilities or home hospice, with a known fatal disease process or well documented injury. Autopsies were not performed in deaths where scene circumstances, medical history and external examination of the body provided sufficient information for death certification.

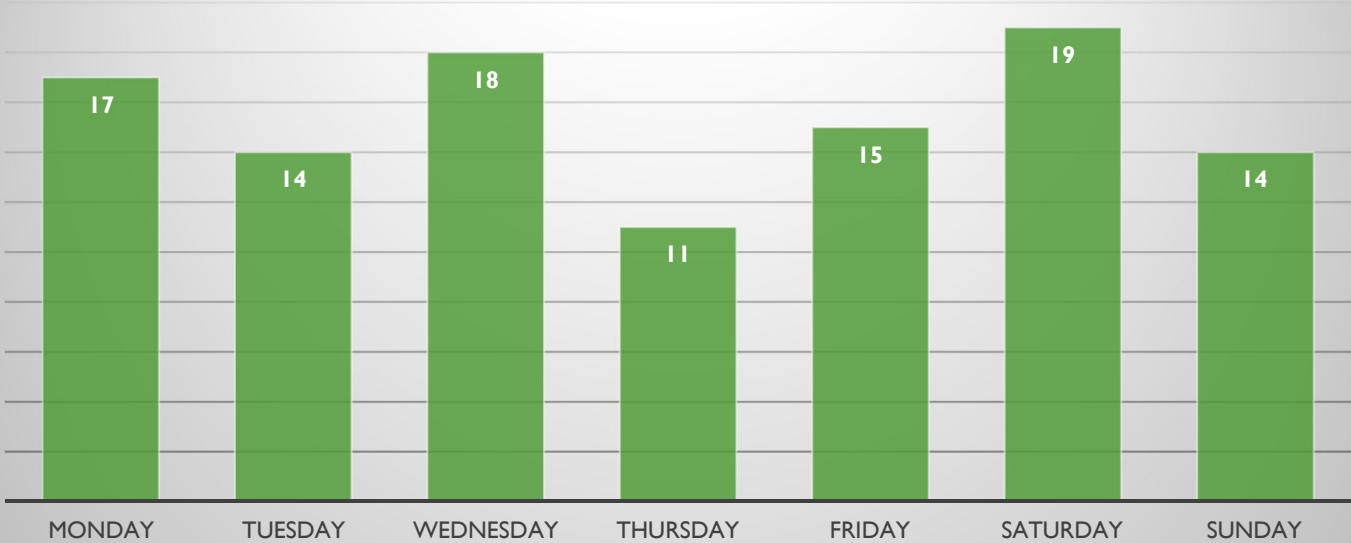


The accompanying tables and figures summarize the information regarding the deaths in all cases where jurisdiction has been assumed by the Coroner.

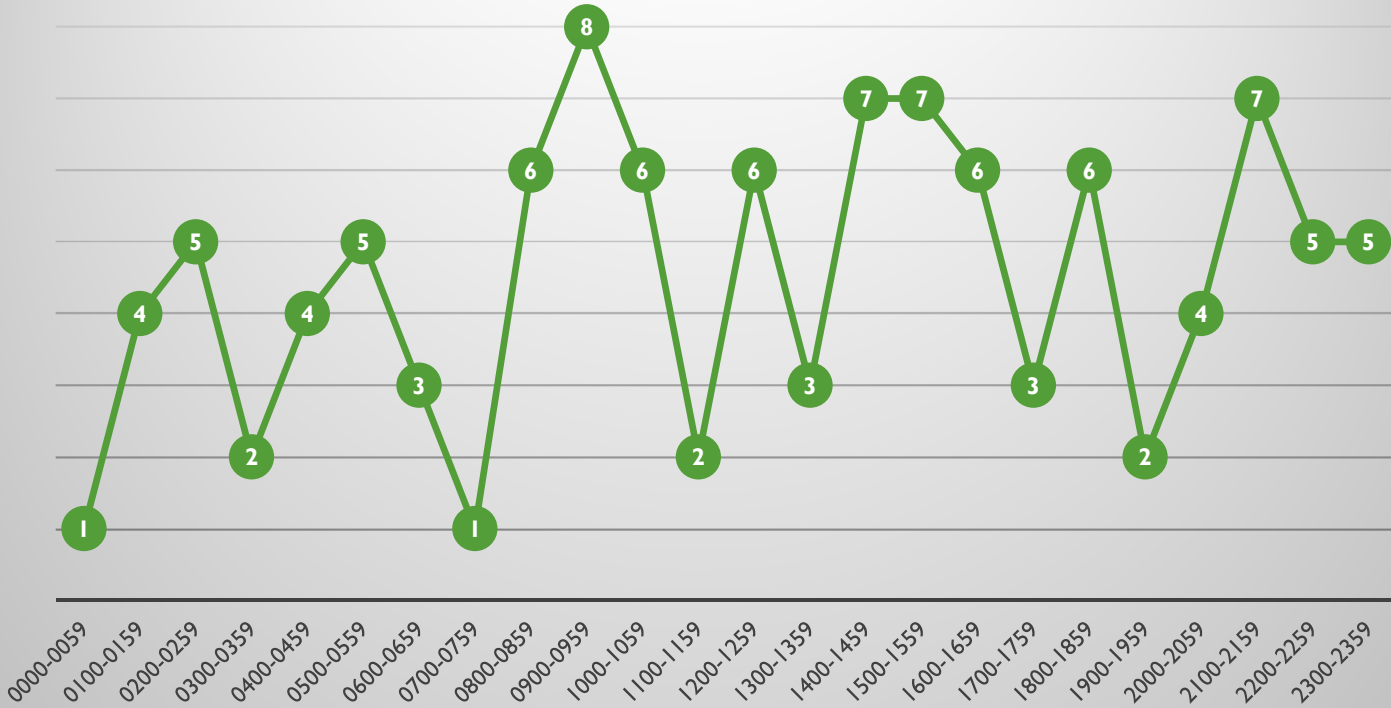


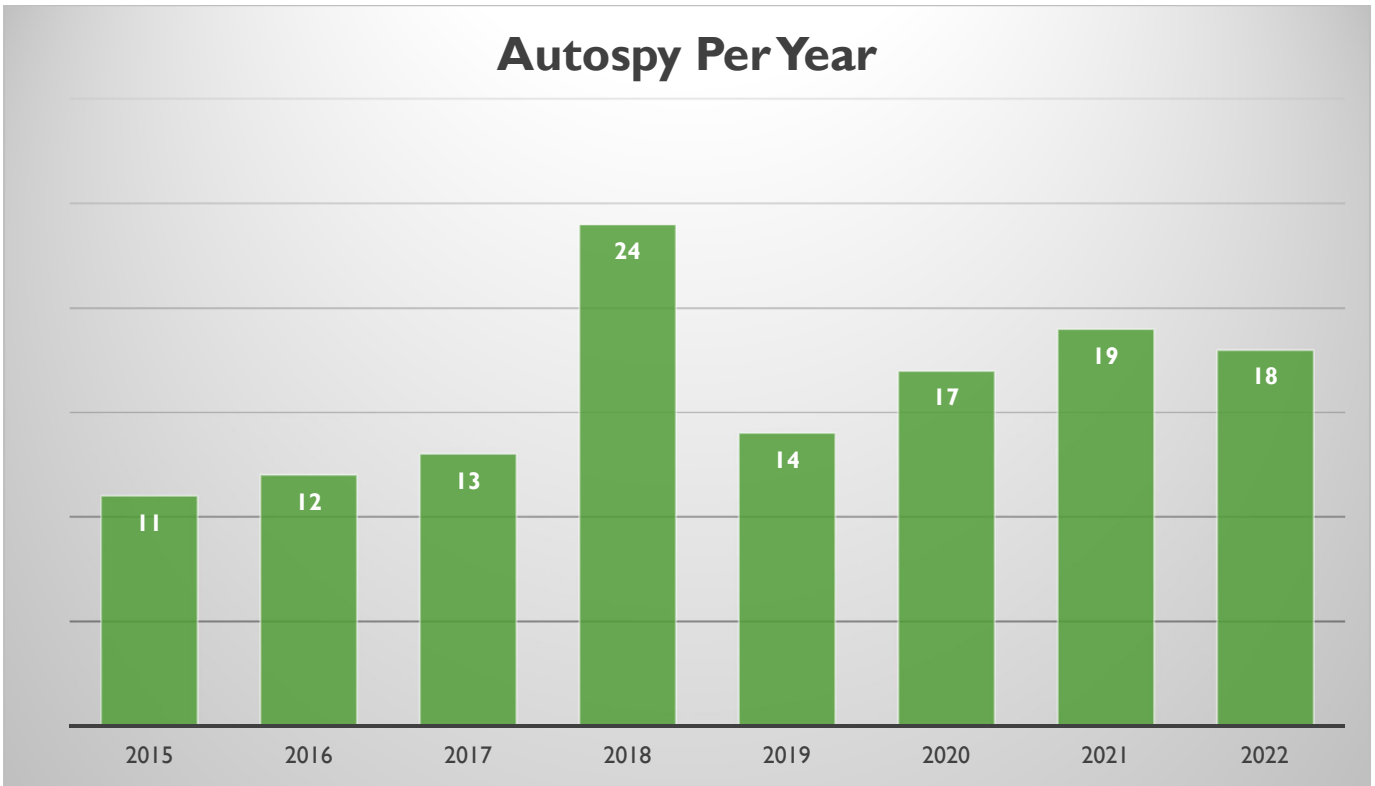
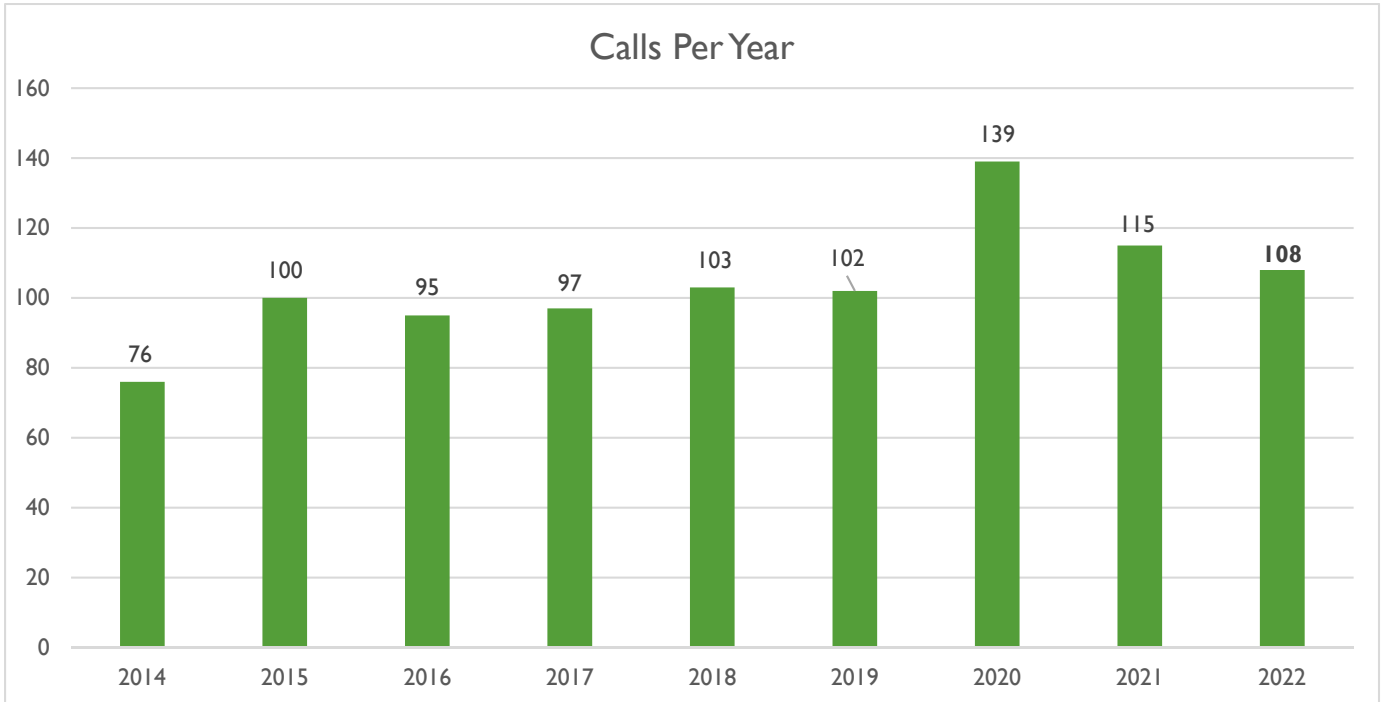


### Call Outs by Day of Week

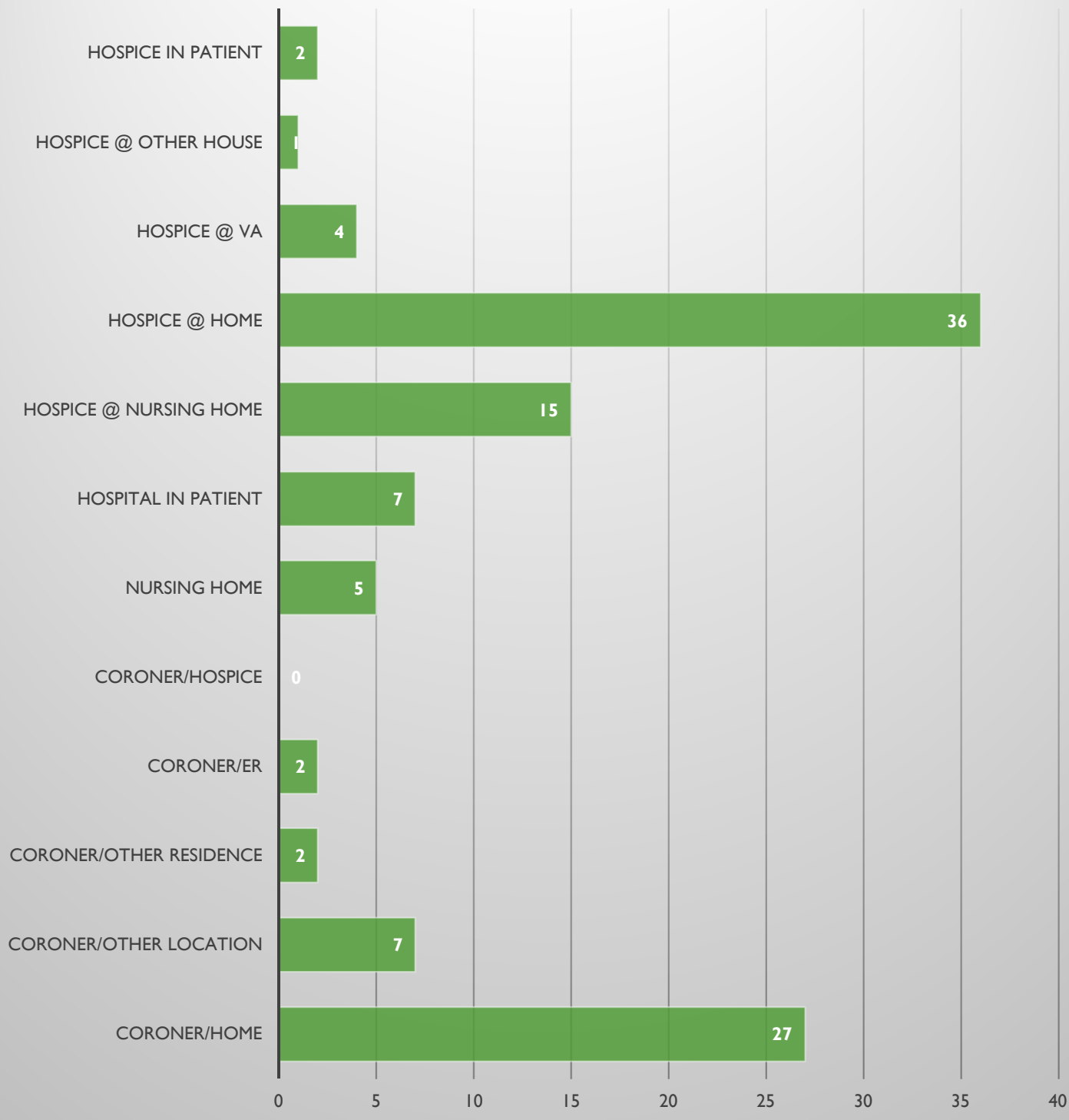


### Call Times



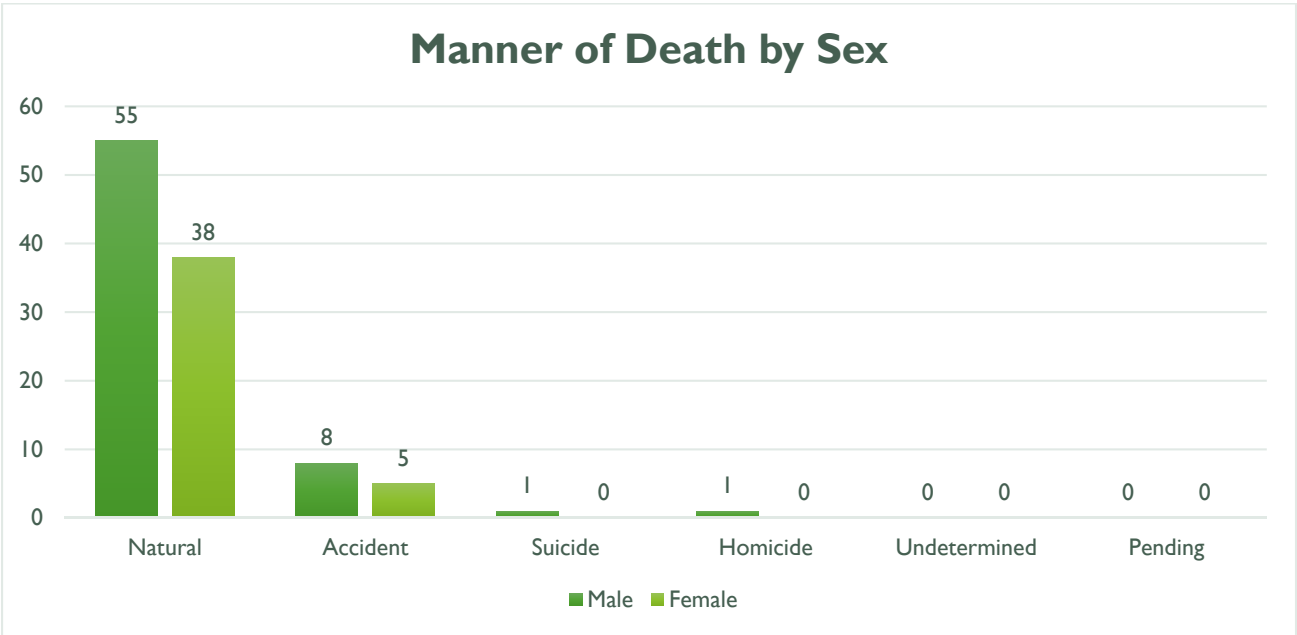
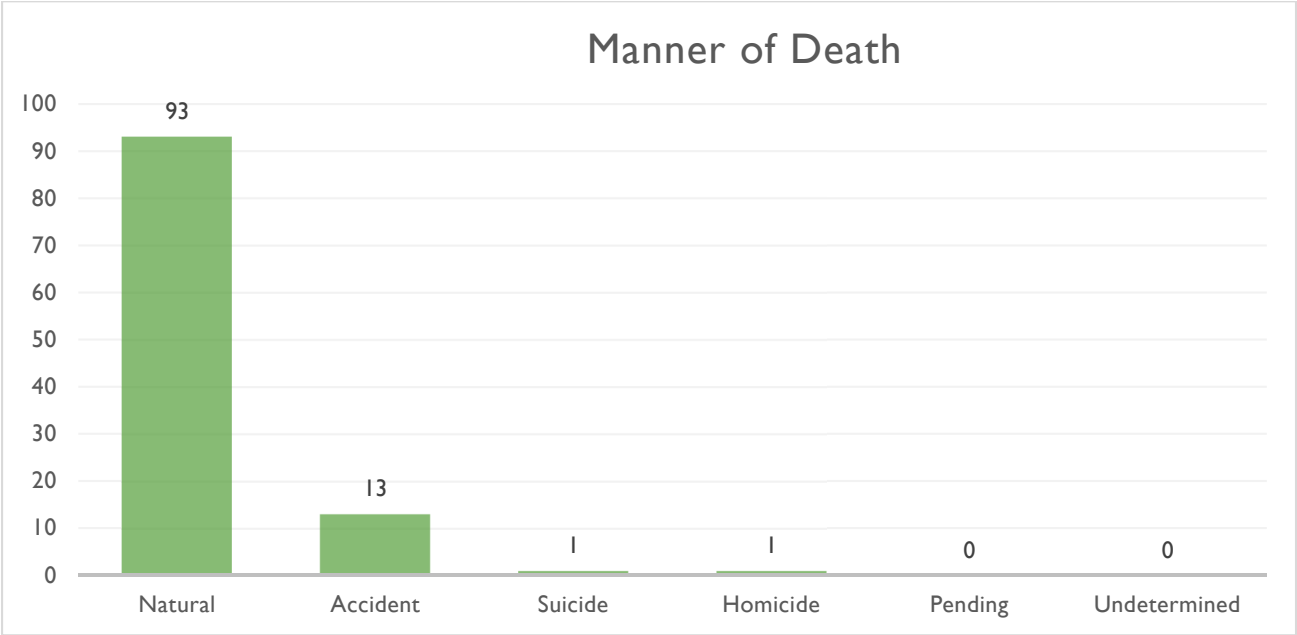


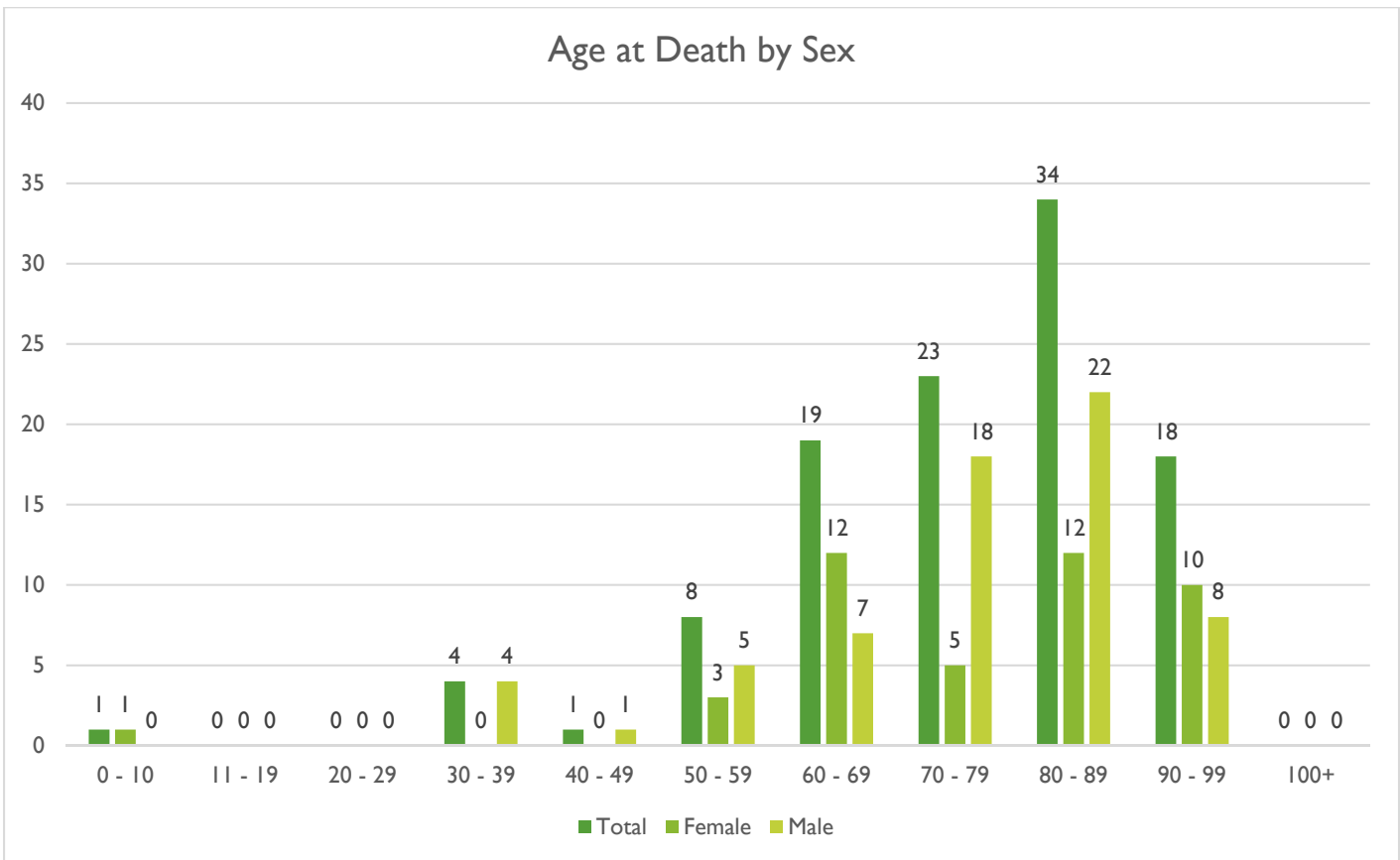
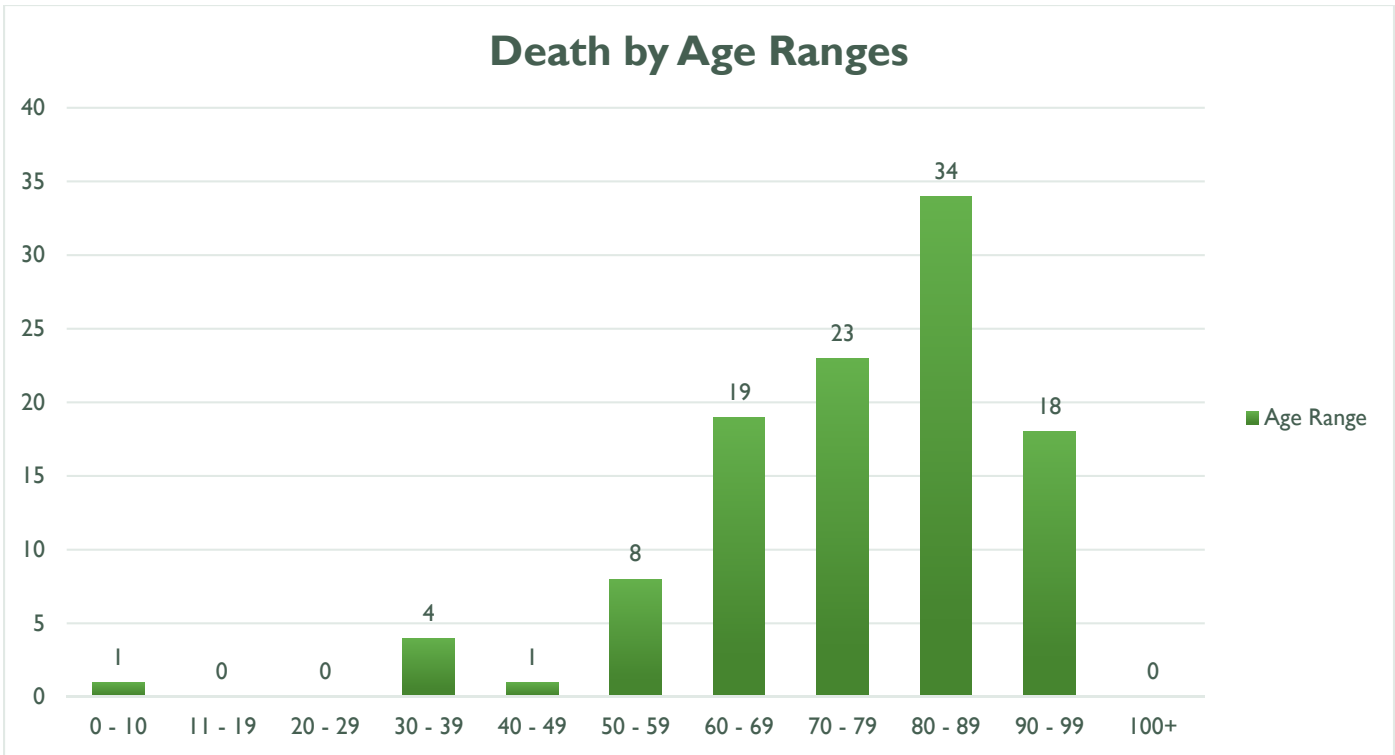
## Types of Calls



## MANNER OF DEATHS

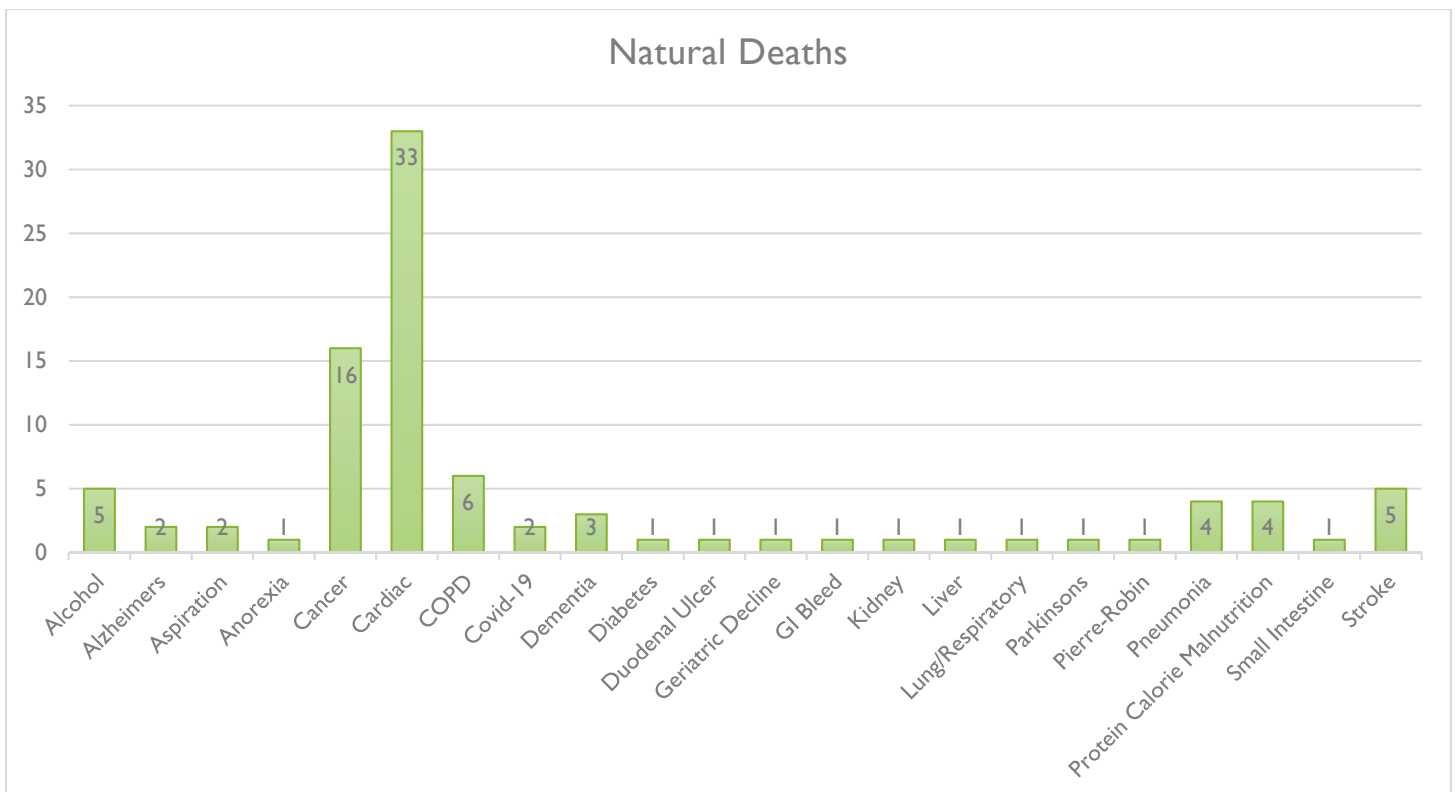
There was a total of 108 Deaths: 93 Naturals, 13 Accidents, 1 Suicides, 1 Homicide, zero Undetermined and zero pending in 2022. There was a total of 65 males and 43 females who passed in our county.



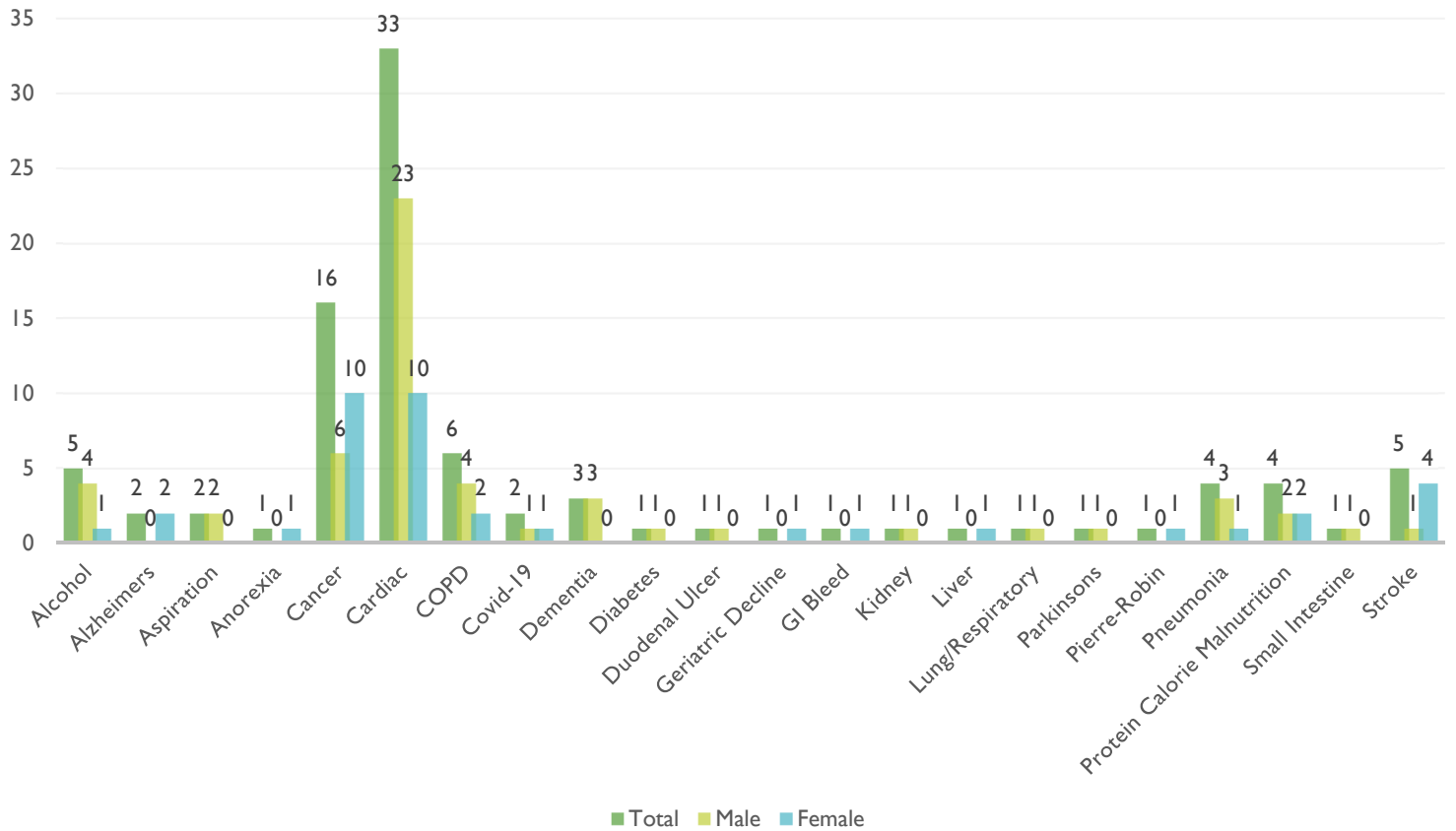


## NATURALS

Natural deaths are any deaths that occur solely by disease. This includes, but is not limited to, heart disease, cancer, strokes, sepsis, diabetes, Alzheimer's, etc. If a natural death is hastened by an injury or any other non-natural event, such as a fall resulting in fractures or brain bleeds, then it is not considered to be a natural death. If the terminal disease process is caused by a non-natural event, such as pneumonia due to long term bed confinement as a result of a motor vehicle accident, then the manner will not be considered natural. Many people who die from a natural cause do not necessarily have only one disease but have several co-morbidities. We have taken the primary cause of death that was assigned by the attending physician or coroner as the main cause in our analysis, with the understanding that there may have been additional diseases an individual had. In Huerfano County, the predominate natural death (33 cases) was due to cardiac disease. Cardiac disease can include but is not limited to hypertension, high cholesterol, coronary artery disease, atrial fibrillation, congestive heart failure. The number of cancer deaths went were 16, the same as in 2021. The types of cancer included but not limited to: breast; bones; blood; prostate; pancreas; renal; esophageal. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) was the primary cause of death in respiratory illnesses.



## NATURAL DEATHS BY CAUSE AND SEX



### COVID-19 DEATHS

There were a total of 8 deaths attributed to the Covid-19 disease. Of these 8 deaths, 1 of the cases, the sole cause of death was Covid-19 and he was vaccinated and had his boosters. In 1 of the cases, it was pneumonia caused by Covid-19. In the other 6 cases, there were multiple comorbidities that attributed to the death including but not limited to morbid obesity, hypertension, coronary artery disease, malnutrition and congestive heart failure. It is unknown on 7 of the deaths if they had the Covid-19 vaccine or boosters.

### ACCIDENTS

An Accident is a death that occurs when there is no evidence of intent. This includes but is not limited to motor vehicle crash (MVC), falls, drownings, accidental drug overdoses.

In 2022, there were a total of 13 accidental deaths.

There were 6 motor vehicle crashes:



One male, 70 years old, was involved in a single vehicle crash on Interstate 25 at mile marker 40. It is believed he had a medical moment due to diabetes. He succumbed to his injuries approximately one month later.

One female, 60 years old, was involved in a single vehicle crash was on Interstate 25 southbound at mile marker 43. She was positive for Valium and tricyclic depressants. She was the restrained driver.

One male, 38 years old, was involved in a single vehicle crash on Highway 69 westbound at mile marker 21. He was positive for THC. He was the unrestrained driver.

Two females, 58 years old and 61 years old, were involved in a three-vehicle crash on Highway 160 westbound mile marker 294. They were both restrained. They were struck by a semi-truck driver, who is believed to have been impaired due to alcohol, drugs and or both.

One male, 55 years old, was driving an asphalt truck on Highway 69 eastbound at mile marker 1.3. He was involved in a single vehicle crash where he rolled his vehicle. He had fentanyl, methadone and diphenhydramine in his system. He was restrained.

There was one ATV accident. This involved a 52-year-old male who sustained trauma to the head. Excess speed and alcohol were both factors. He was also not wearing a helmet.

There were 2 falls. One was an 84-year-old female who sustained a fall in her home and suffered a subdural hematoma (bleeding on the brain). The second fall was a 33-year-old male who sustained blunt force injuries after falling 200 feet while rock climbing.

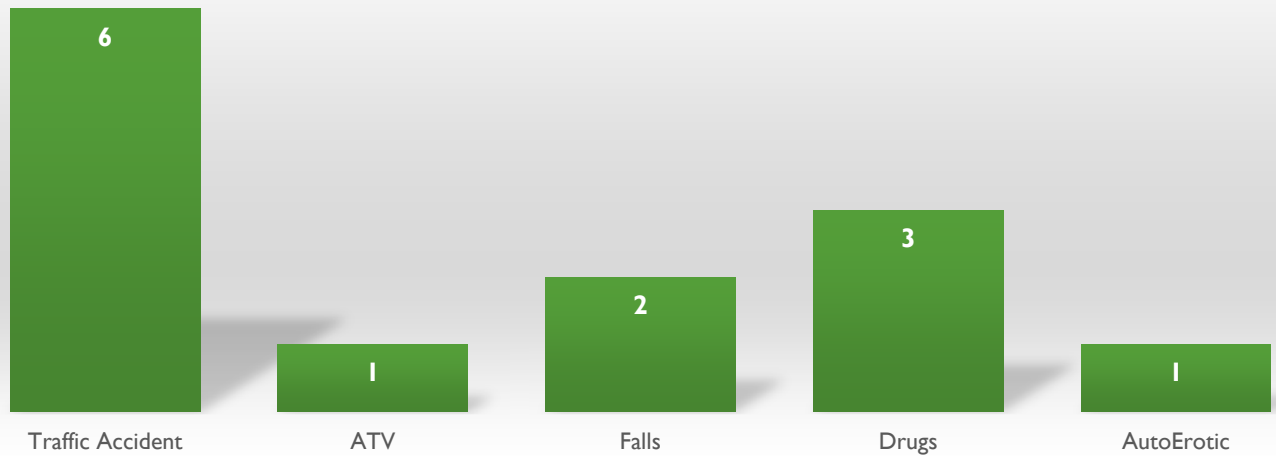
There were 3 accidental drug overdoses. The drug overdoses included 1 female and 2 males. Age of the males was 58 and 62. The age of the female was 66. All drug overdoses involved methamphetamine. Two had mixed drug toxicity of methamphetamine and either cocaine or heroin.

There was one autoerotic asphyxia death. This involved a 60-year-old male who used a device to deliver nitrous oxide. The fail safe to insure he did not suffocate, failed.

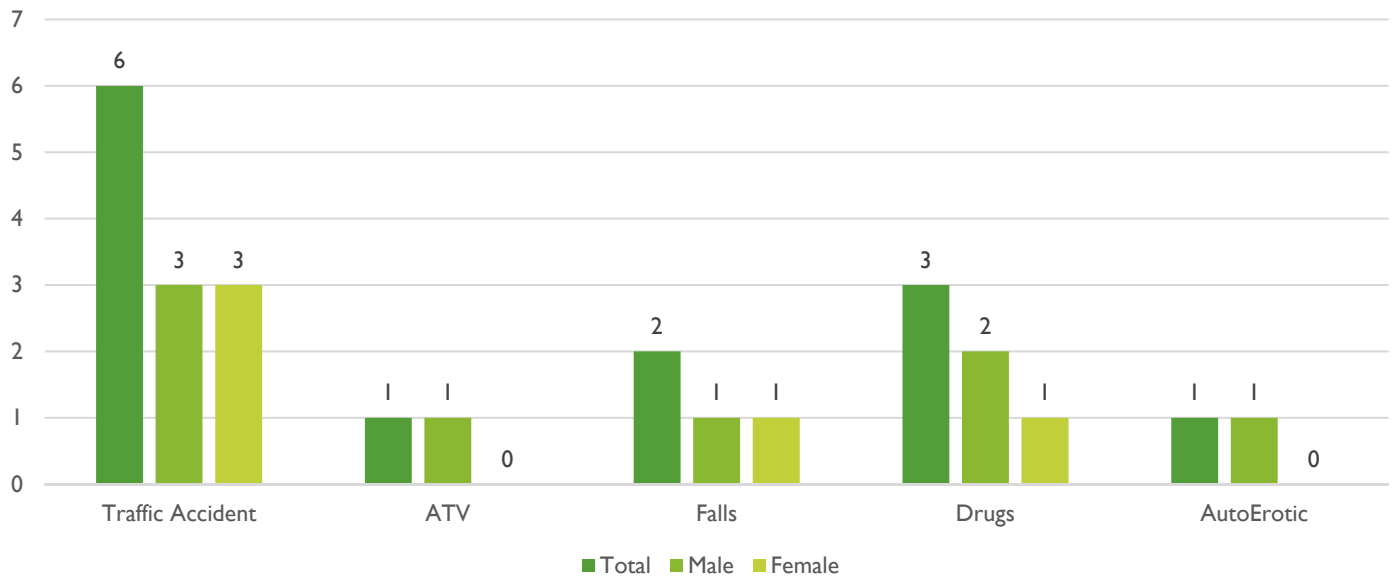




### Accident Types



### Accident Types by Sex



## SUICIDES

A suicide is a type of death that is a result of a purposeful action set in motion to end one’s life. A suicide note may or may not be present in a suicide. There was 1 suicide in Huerfano County in 2022. The suicide was a male who sustained a gun shot wound to the head. He was 44 years old. He was positive for THC.



## HOMICIDES

A homicide is a death resulting from injuries inflicted by another person (explicit or implicit). There was 1 homicide in all of 2022. The victim was a 56-year-old male who sustained stab wounds. He was also positive for amphetamines and methamphetamines.

## UNDETERMINED

An undetermined death is one that is assigned when there is insufficient evidence or information, especially about intent, to assign manner. This is commonly used in skeletal remains that have no obvious trauma but could include circumstances that are not clear during the investigation. In 2022, there were no undetermined deaths.

Undetermined can be changed if more information is obtained.

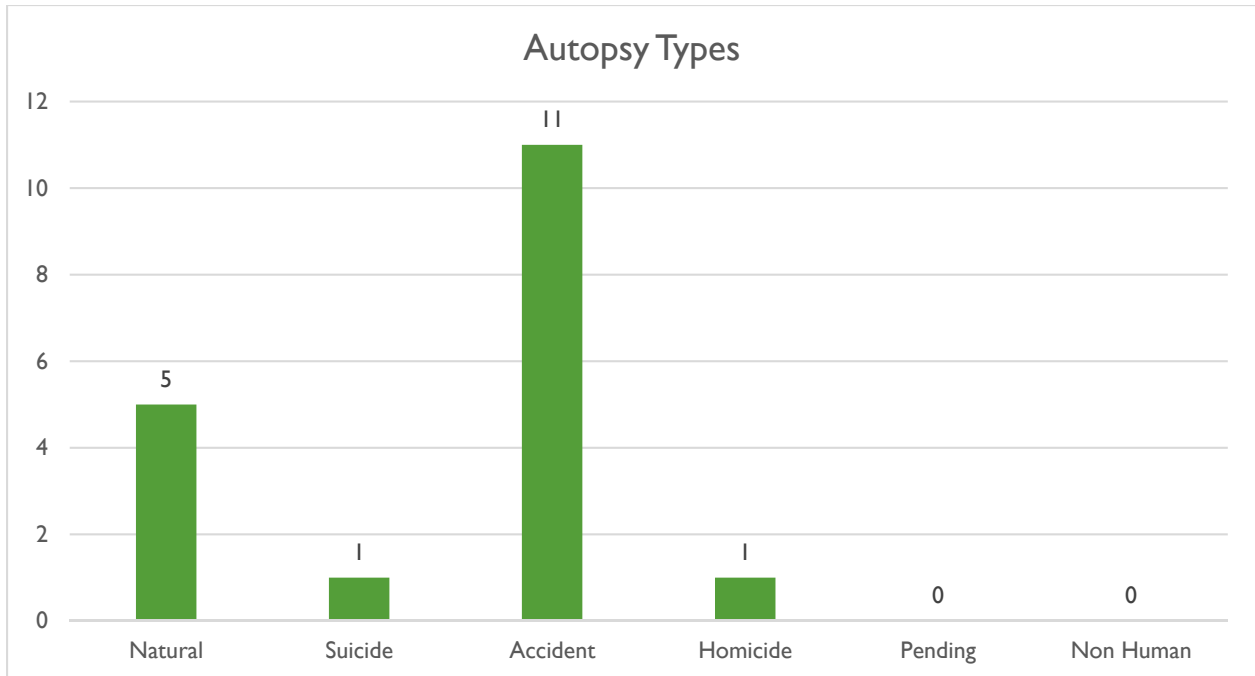
## PENDING

In 2022, there were no open cases being investigated.

## AUTOPSY INFORMATION

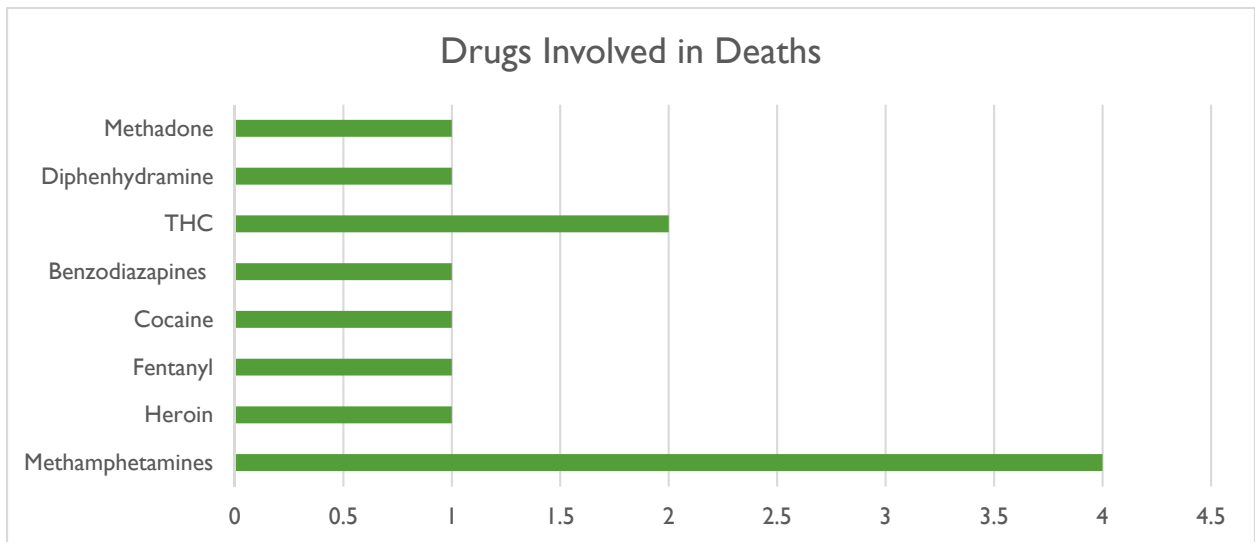
Of the 108 reportable deaths in Huerfano County, 44 cases were considered Coroner calls. These are the cases where the Coroner has to go to the scene and do further investigation. This type of call can take anywhere from 4–10 hours of scene investigation, coroner's report, next of kin notification and follow-up. When a case is then determined that it needs further investigation, the case is sent for a forensic autopsy. A full autopsy including toxicology is performed. Due to the size of Huerfano County, we have contracted with the El Paso County Coroner's Office to have our autopsies performed. They have four board certified Forensic Pathologists on staff and one of only three accredited toxicology labs in the state. With their assistance, we are able to have forensic autopsies performed on any case that is required and or determined by law. There were 18 autopsies in 2022.





**INFORMATION REGARDING DEATHS THAT INVOLVED DRUGS**

Although drugs, both illicit and prescription, have played a role in an increasing number of deaths over the years across the country, in Huerfano County, for the 2022 year, it has been a very small number, being only .027% of all direct deaths. In a total of 7 deaths, drugs were found in the system.



**2022 MISCELLANEOUS CORONER CALLS AND INFORMATION**



The Huerfano County Coroner's Office covered 6 Green Burials on private land in 2022. The Office of the Coroner has to ensure the burials are GPS recorded. The burials are overseen by the Office to ensure all state and local statutes are complied with. The burials are recorded with the County Clerk to maintain record of all burials in the county.

The Coroner and her deputies participated in continued education throughout the year, including the annual Colorado Coroners Association training. Ms. Valdez is an elected member of the Colorado Coroner's Association Board of Directors. She helps provide a voice for smaller counties in Colorado. Ms. Valdez does peer review for coroner cases from other coroner offices. She also assists with coroner education for the active coroners and deputy coroners in the state.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Coroner, Vonnie Valdez, would like to thank her deputies for their time and energy. She would like to thank the Huerfano County Sheriff's Office and CBI for their assistance in investigating cases. Thanks to the forensic pathologists of El Paso County Coroner's Office with all of our autopsies. She would like to thank the Huerfano County Commissioners, the County Administrator and the community for their continued support of the Office of the Coroner.

## EMPLOYEE BIOGRAPHIES

Vonnie Maier-Valdez, was elected Huerfano County Coroner in November 2014. She has been a Registered Nurse for over 37 years and holds a BSN and a Master's Degree in Organizational Management. Vonnie is a certified death investigator and has completed the basic crime scene class, taught by CBI. She is a sitting board member for the Colorado Coroners Association. Vonnie lives on a cattle ranch with her husband and enjoys the outdoors and all her animals. Vonnie enjoys traveling and new adventures.

Marc Biggins has been a Deputy Coroner since 2014. He also has served as a Nationally Registered Paramedic and Flight Medic for over 28 years both in Las Vegas, Nevada and Colorado. He is also a certified death investigator. Additionally, Marc is also a Huerfano County Sheriff's Deputy and when he finds the time assists his wife, Liorah, managing their working Sheep and Cattle ranch near LaVeta.

Norma Mower resides in LaVeta with husband, Dave. She is a registered nurse for over 30 years and a Certified Physician Assistant for over 18 years. She also is a volunteer EMT for LaVeta Fire Protection District for a total of 24 years. She has been a Huerfano County Deputy Coroner 23 years, and a Certified Death Investigator. Hobbies include: going to the ocean, hunting, fishing and Camping.

Dave Mower also resides in LaVeta. He has 31 years as a firefighter, 28 years as a Professional Fire Fighter/ Deputy Fire Chief and 3 years as Assistant Fire Chief for LaVeta Fire Protection District. Dave is now on the LaVeta Fire Protection Board of Directors. Nationally Registered Paramedic for 27 Years and EMT prior to that. Huerfano County Deputy Coroner for 22 Years and Certified Death Investigator. Hobbies: hunting, fishing and spending time with family.



Becky Brown resides in the La Veta area. She has a Bachelor of Science, a Bachelor of Chemistry, a Master in Marketing and attended medical school later in life. She has a great interest in forensic science and is working on furthering her death investigation education. Becky loves her dogs, traveling and being outdoors.

Craig Lessar is the newest Deputy Coroner and from Walsenburg. He is a native of Huerfano County. He is a Captain for Huerfano County Sheriff's Office and has been with them for 21 years. He is also the head of Search and Rescue. He enjoys hunting and fishing. He rides a motorcycle and loves to cruise. He recently got married and has a 15-year-old son.

Abigail Manus is a resident of El Paso County. She was a death investigator with El Paso County Coroner's Office for 7 years. Abigail continues to be a medicolegal death investigator consultant. She assists Huerfano County Coroner with any task set before her. She has a bachelors in Anthropology from Arizona State University and a Masters in Forensic Science from the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She is an American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigator-Diplomat and a certified investigator with the Colorado Coroner Association.

