



Huerfano County Coroner 2023 Annual Report

Vonnie Valdez – Coroner

07/24/2024

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Compiled by Vonnie Valdez

Cover Photo Courtesy 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.

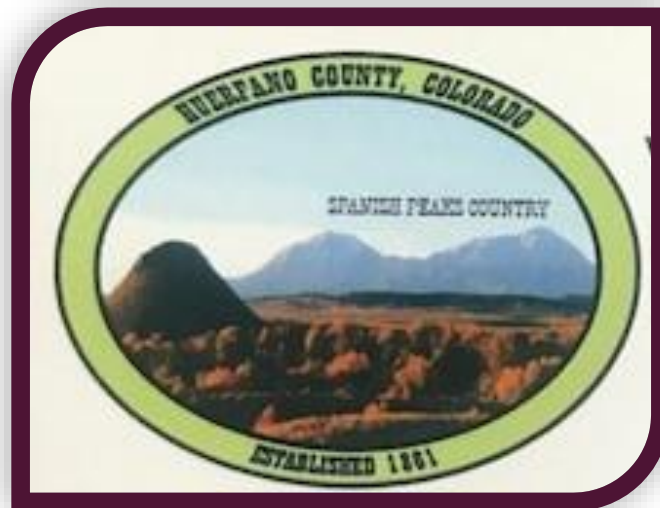
The cause of death is defined as the disease or injury that resulted in the death of an individual. The manner of death is ruled as one of the following: Natural, Accident, Homicide, Suicide or Undetermined. Undetermined Manner of Death includes deaths in which manner could not clearly be determined, 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

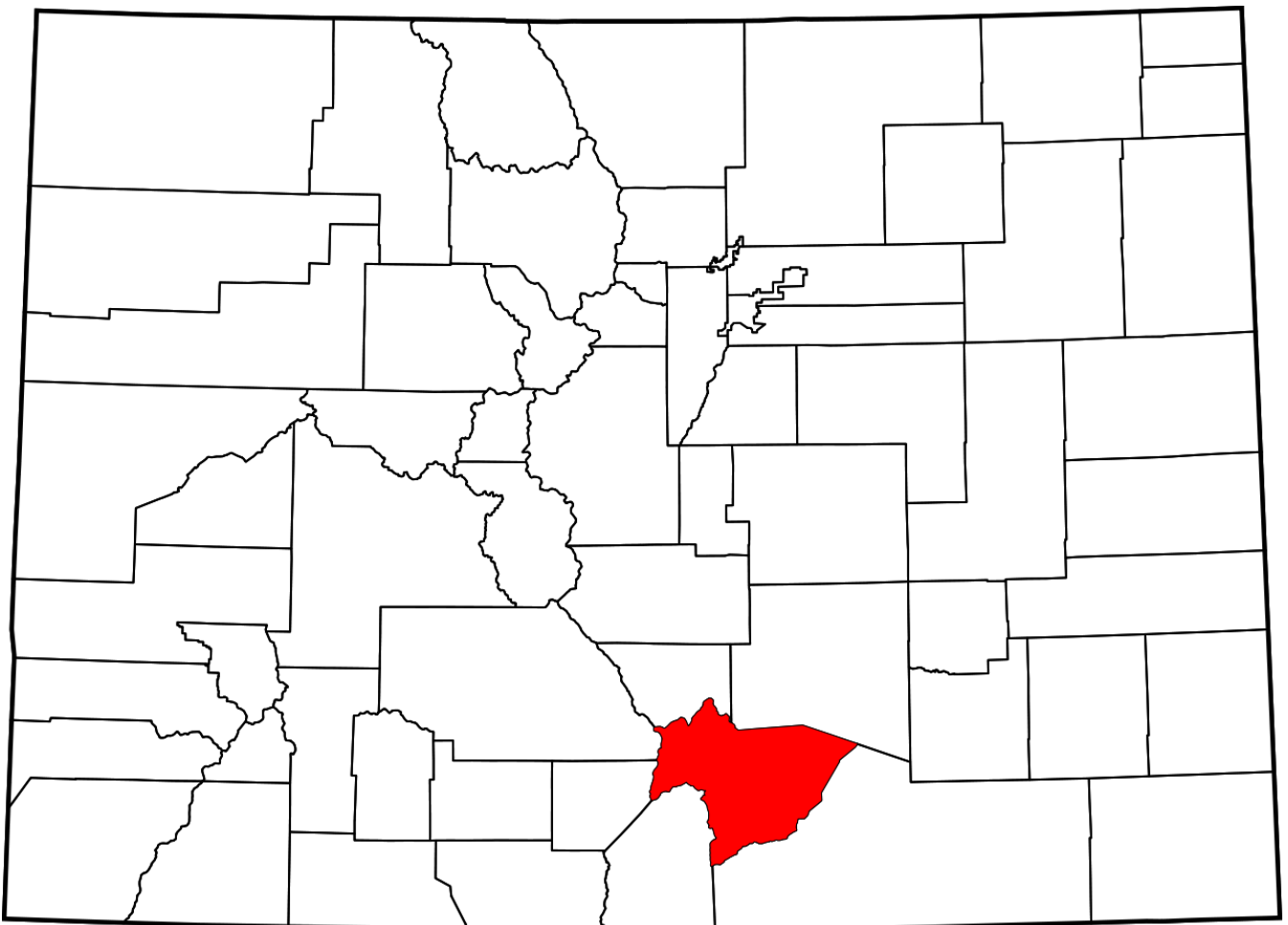


HUERFANO COUNTY JURISDICTION

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 2023.

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 30th 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 44th largest county by population in Colorado.



Huerfano County

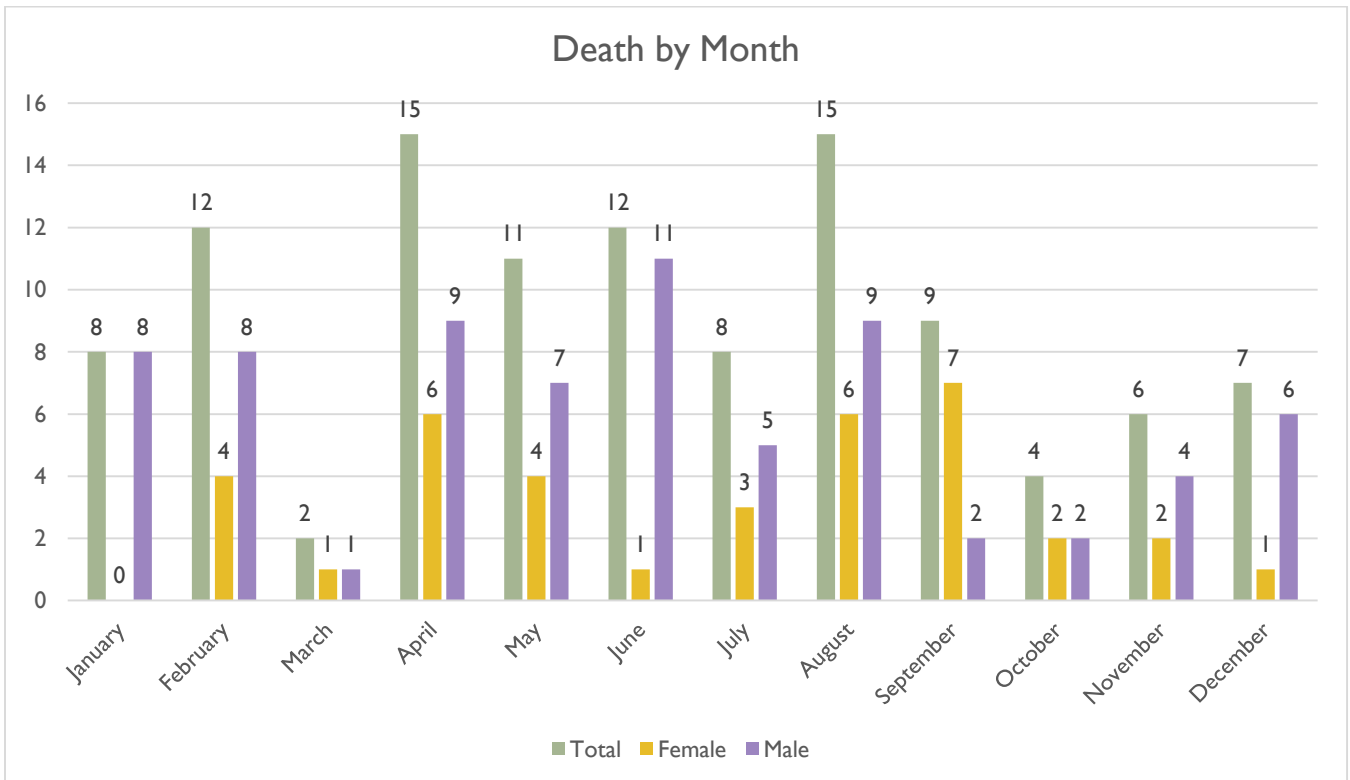
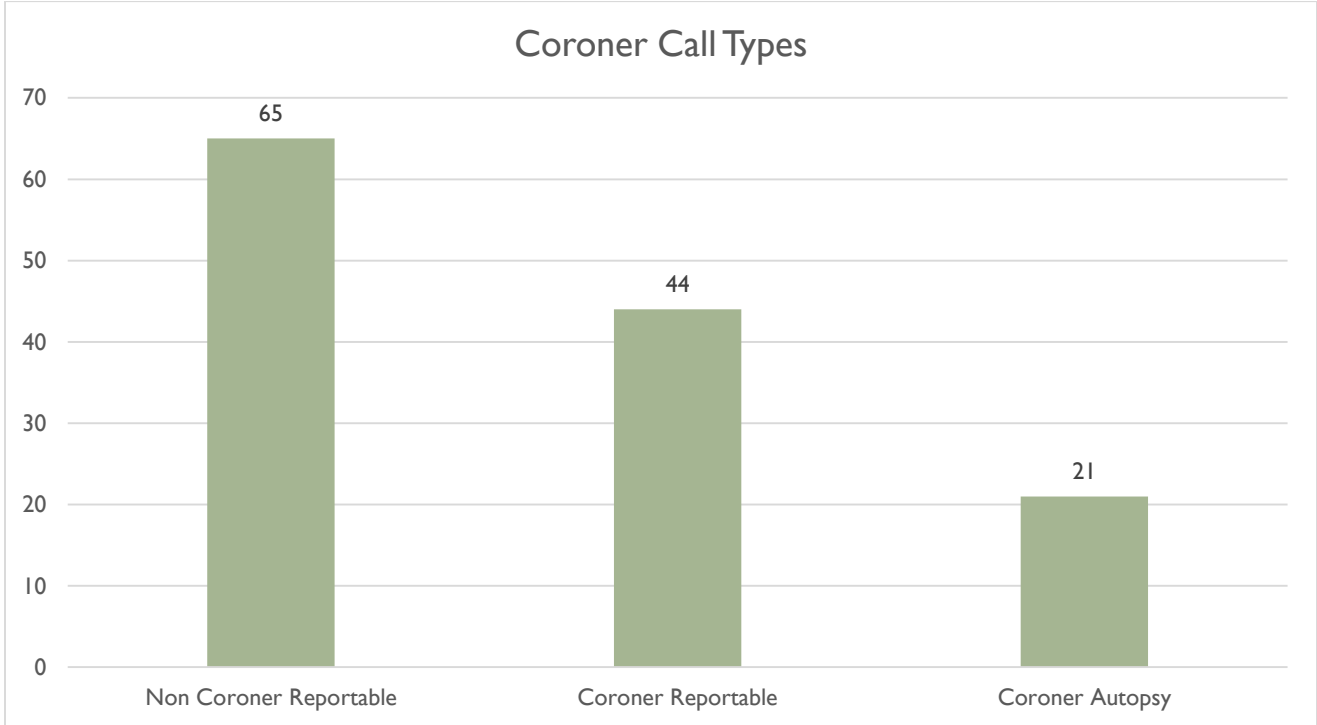


DEATHS IN 2023

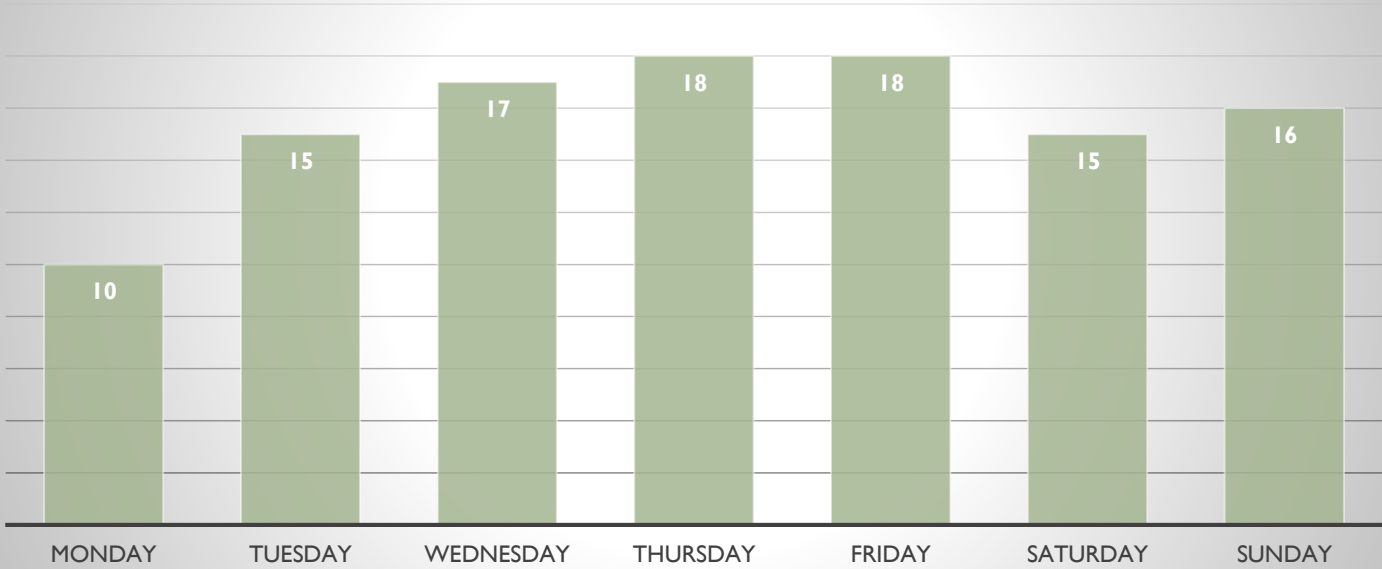
The overall caseload for 2023 was 109 cases, reported by law enforcement, medical personnel or another Coroner's Office. This included 44 reportable deaths, of which 21 of the cases required autopsies. There were 7 transfer of jurisdiction cases that were referred back to Huerfano County per Colorado 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, five came from El Paso County and 2 came from Pueblo 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.

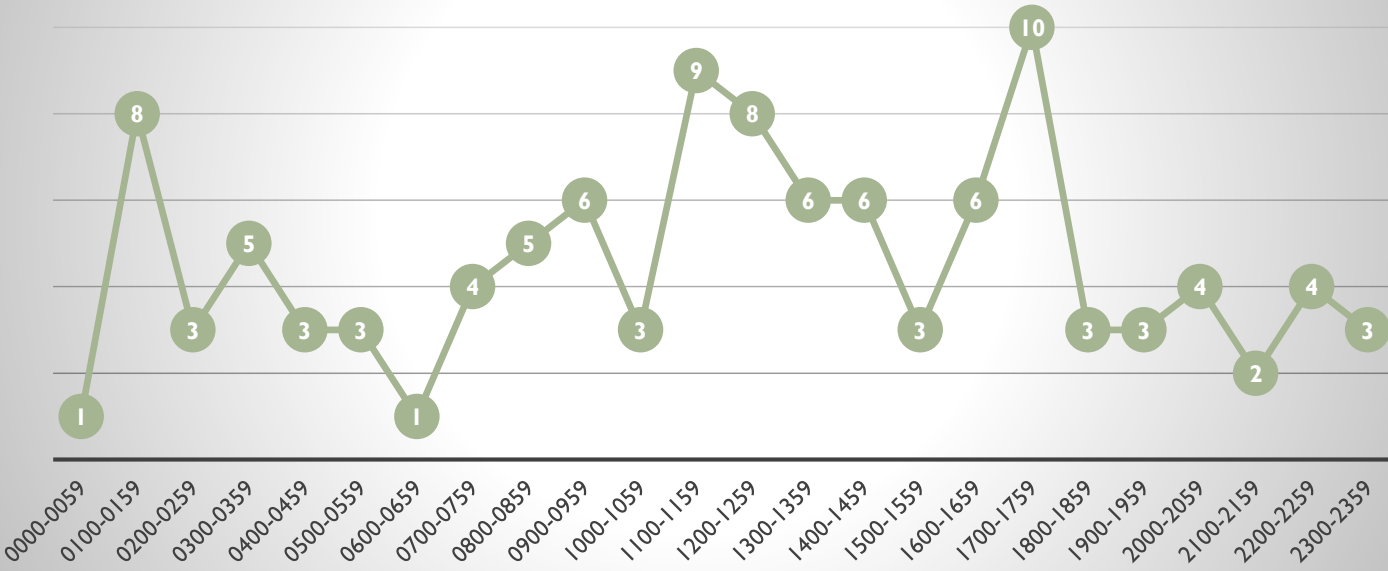
The accompanying tables and figures summarize the information regarding the deaths in all cases where jurisdiction has been assumed by the Coroner.

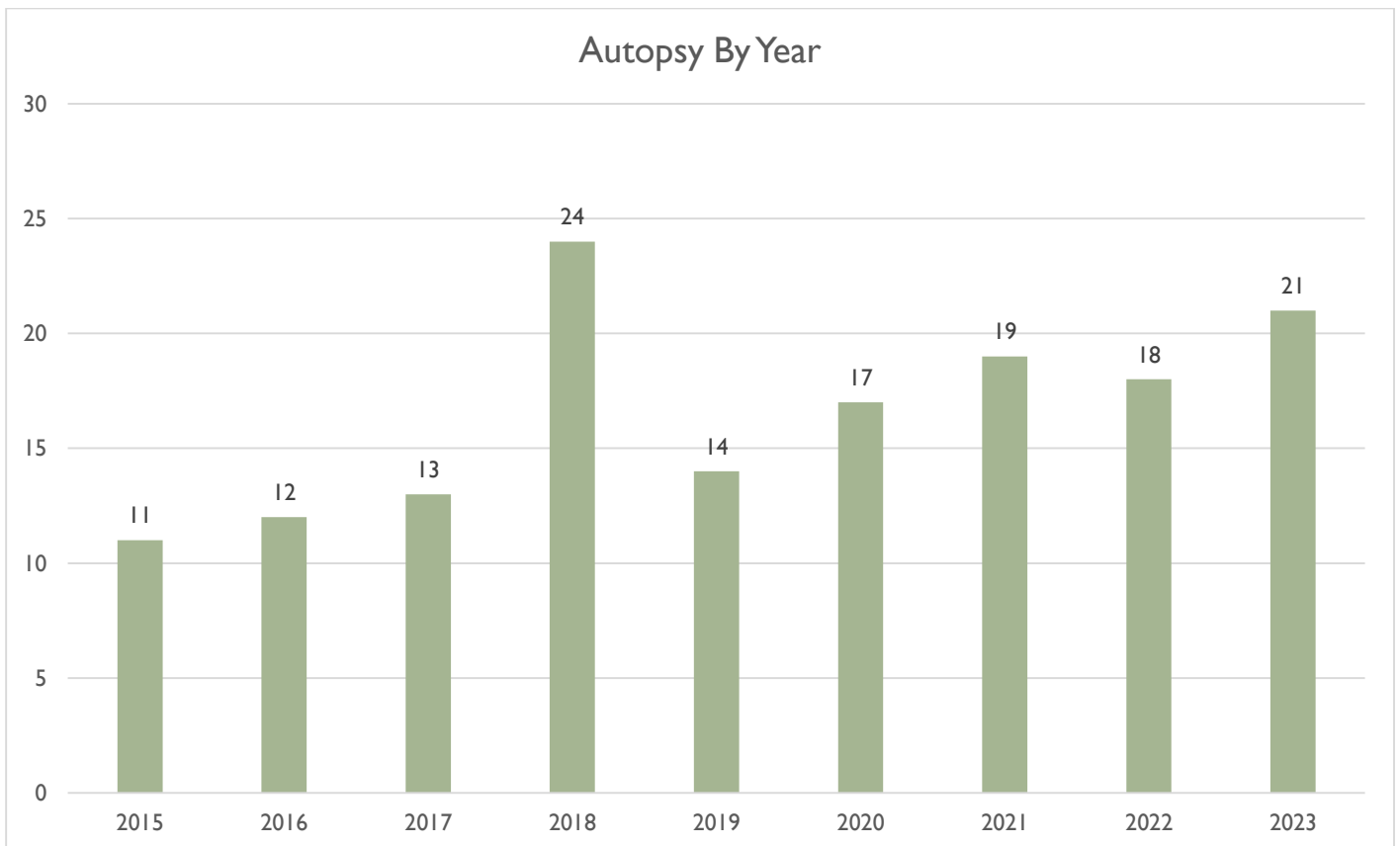
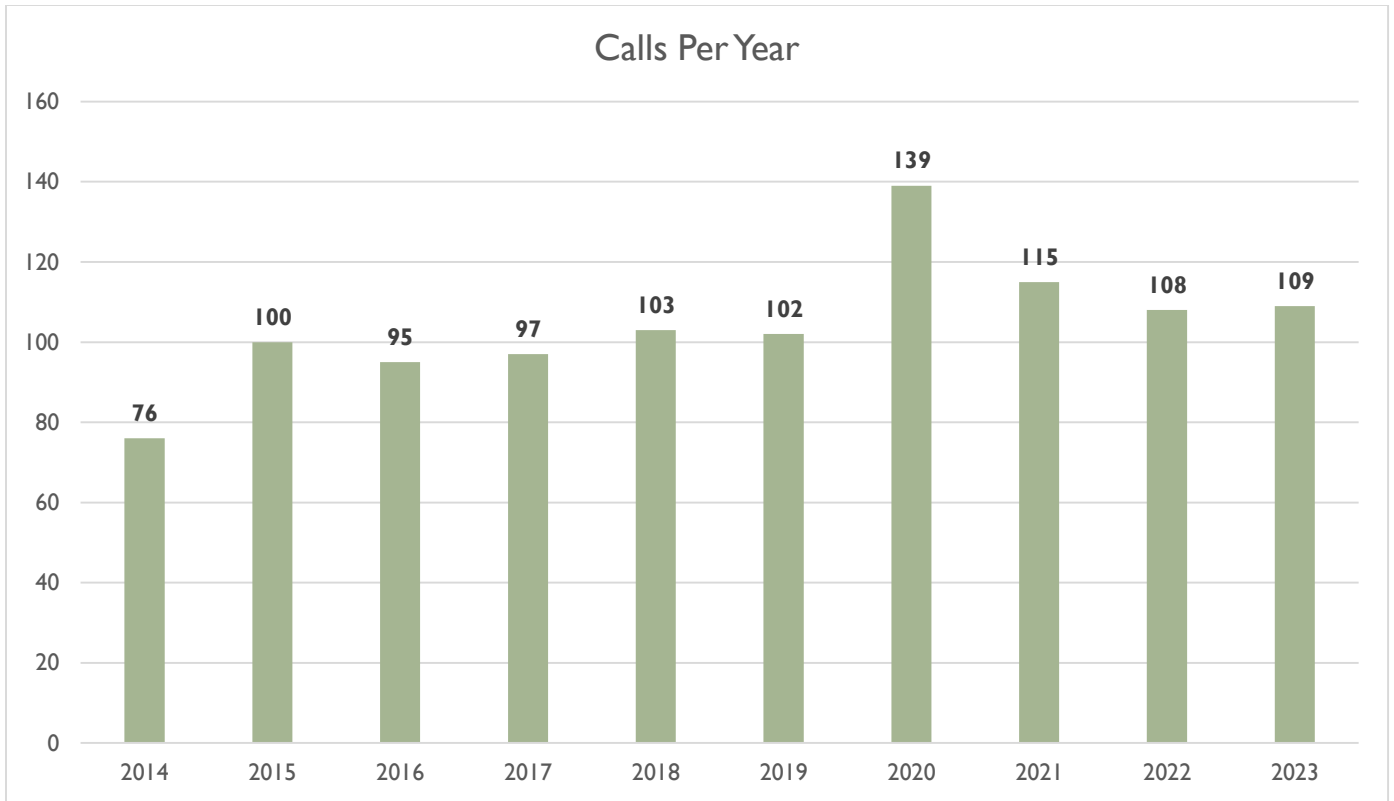


Call Outs by Day of Week

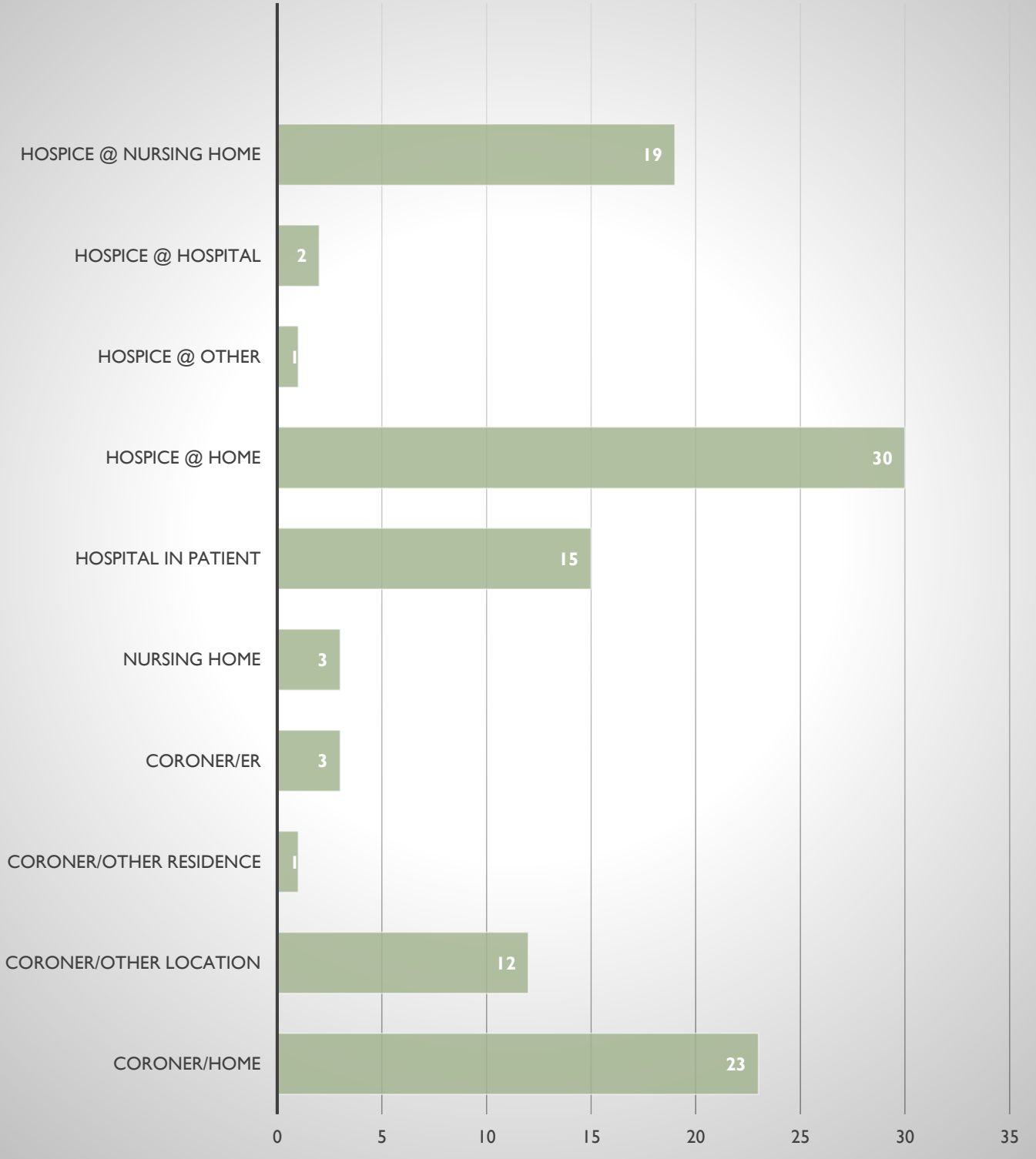


Call Times



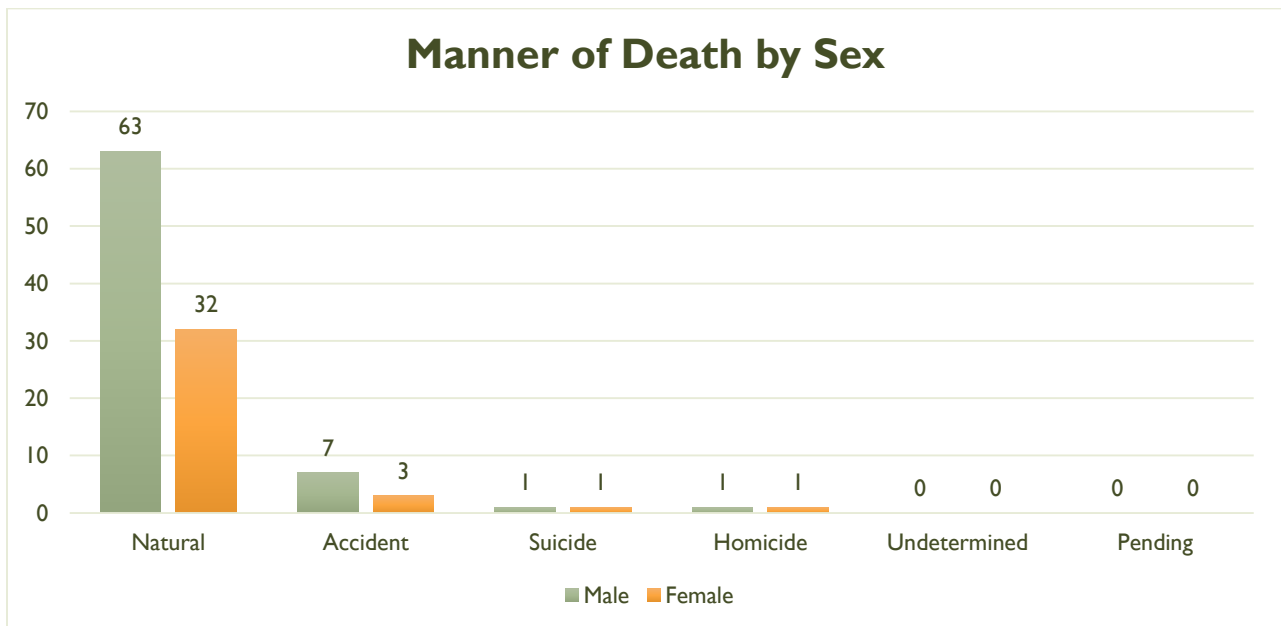
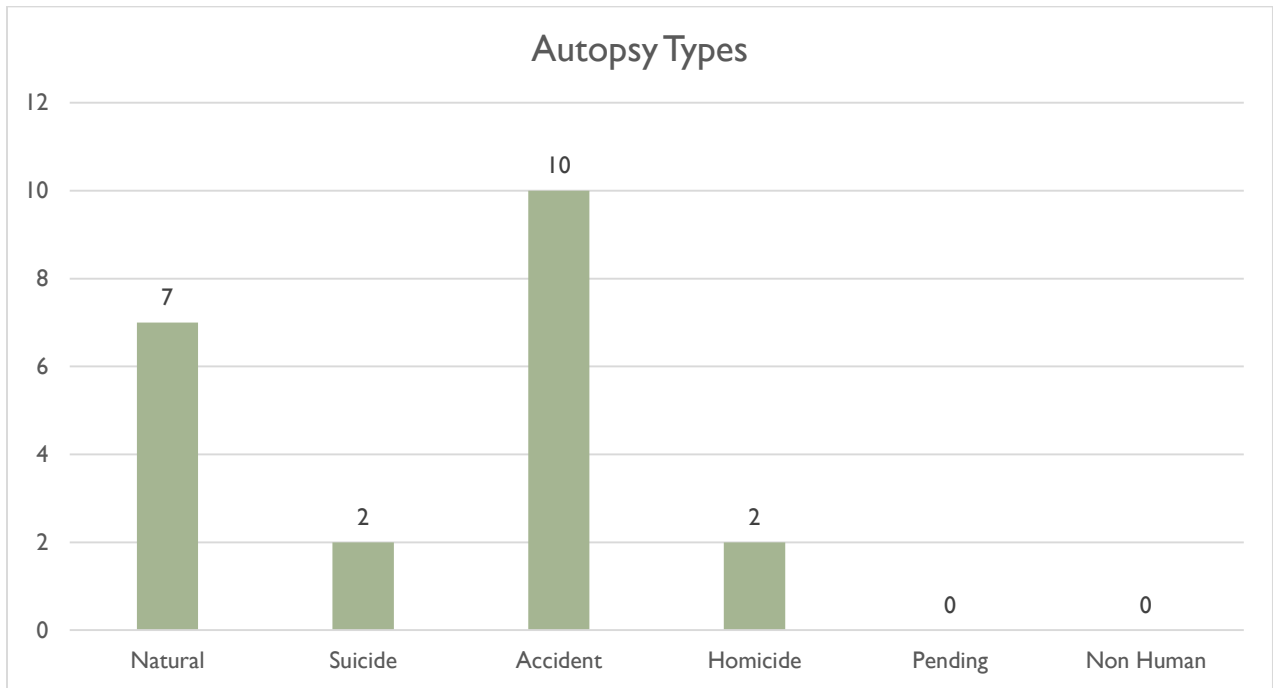


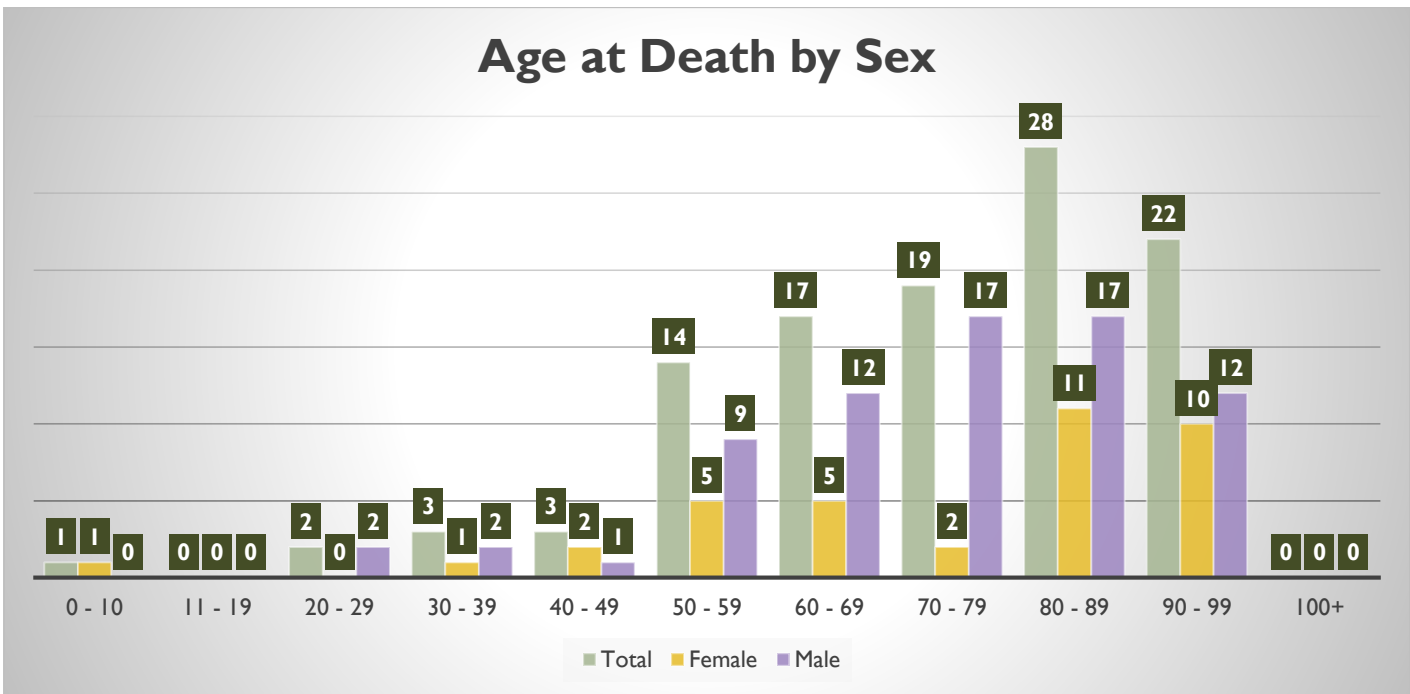
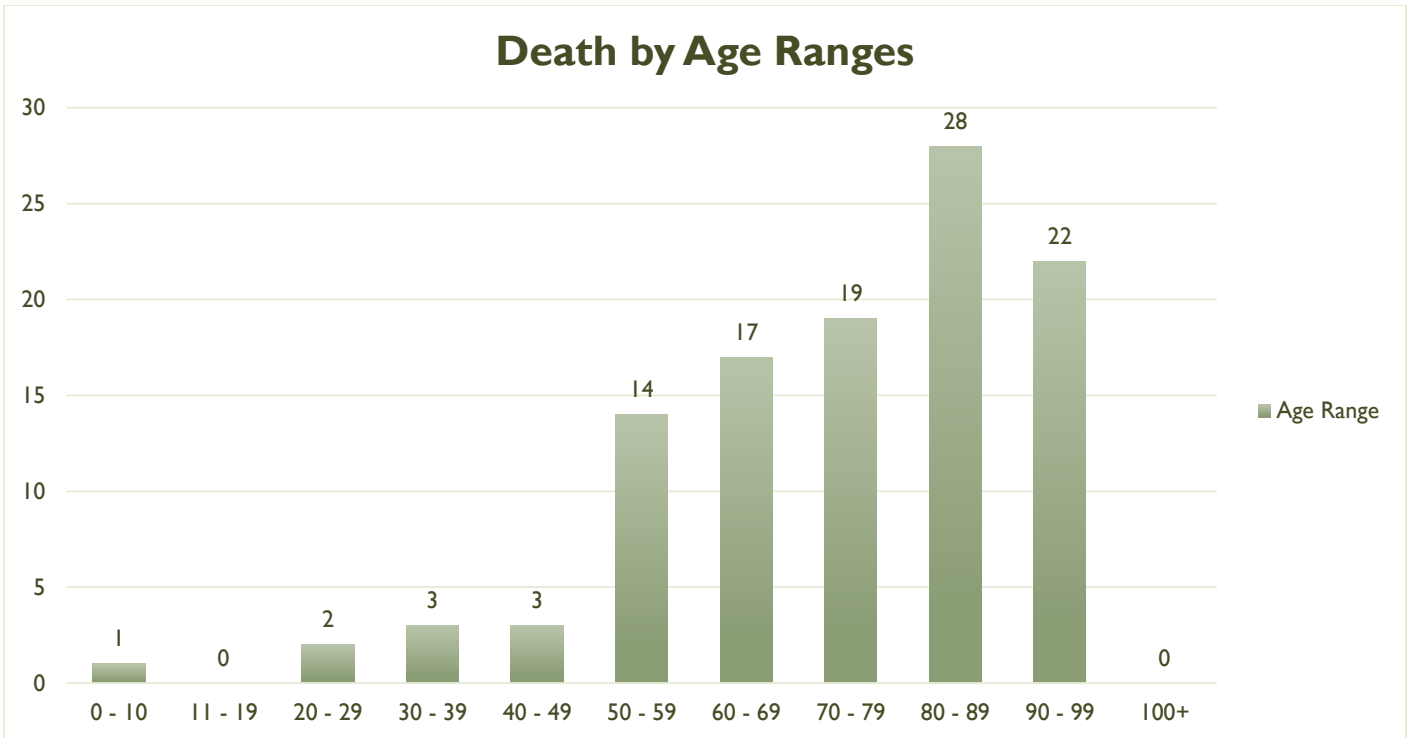
Types of Calls



MANNER OF DEATHS

There was a total of 109 Deaths: 95 Naturals, 10 Accidents, 2 Suicides, 2 Homicide, zero Undetermined and zero pending in 2023. There was a total of 72 males and 37 females who passed in our county.



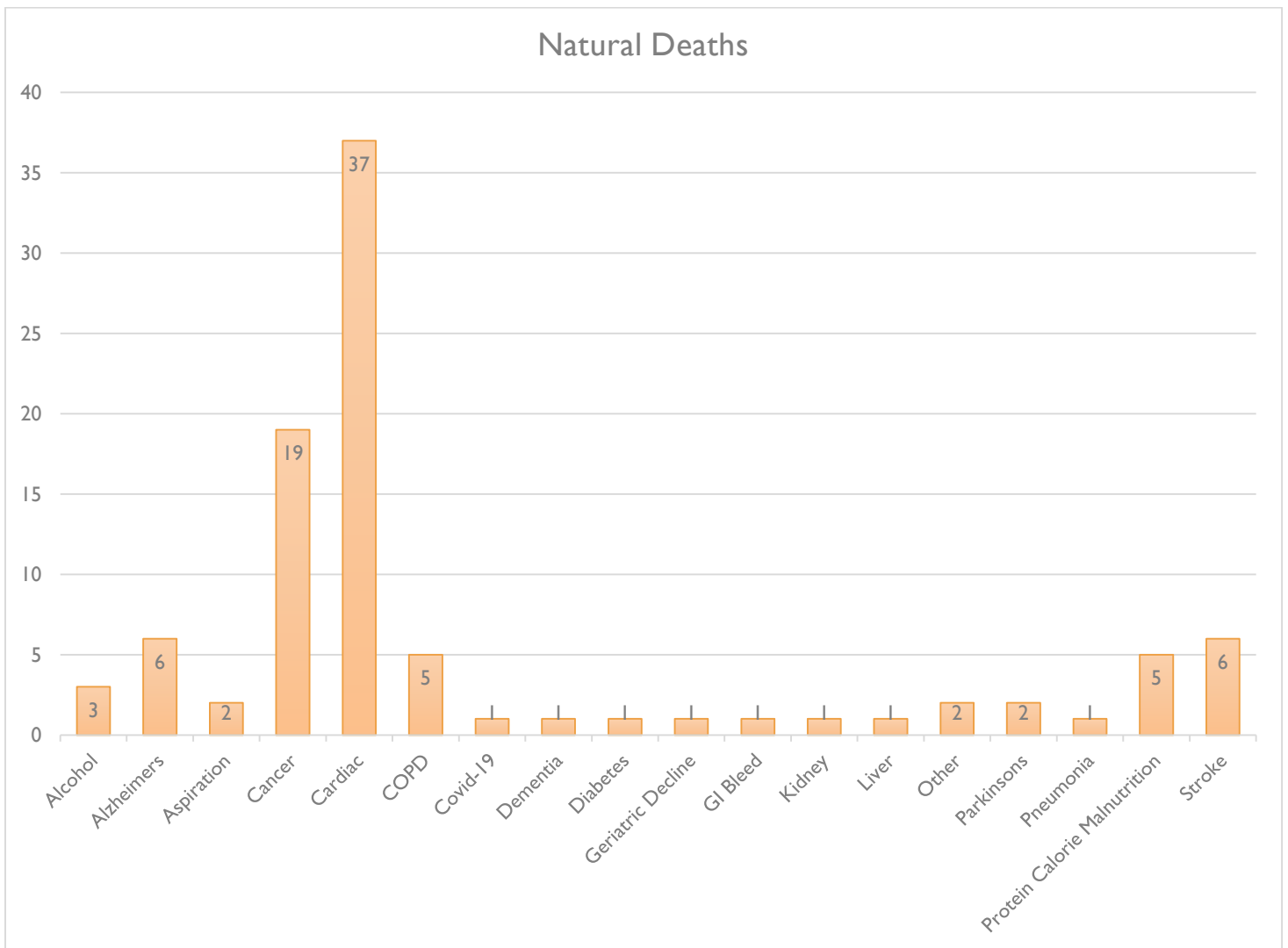


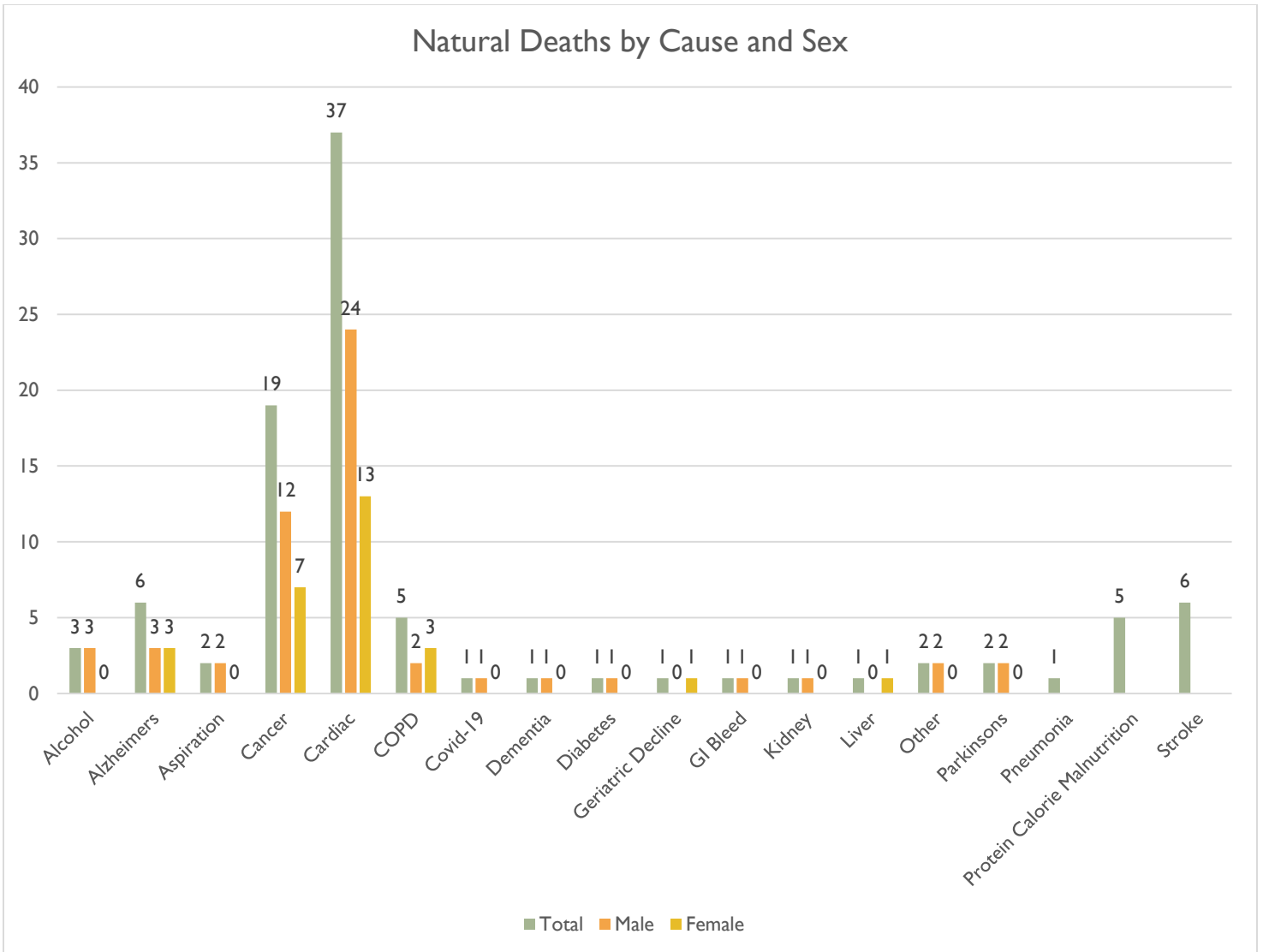
NATURALS

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 (37 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 19, a slight increase from previous years. 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.





COVID-19 DEATHS

There was a total of 2 deaths attributed to the Covid-19 disease. In 1 of the cases, it was pneumonia caused by Covid-19. In the other case, there were multiple comorbidities that attributed to the death including but not limited to morbid obesity, diabetes and cardiac hypertrophy.

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 2023, there were a total of 10 accidental deaths.

There were 6 motor vehicle crashes:



One crash was at Interstate 25 between mile marker 58 and 59. It was a single vehicle crash. Both the driver and passenger were unrestrained, and both had alcohol in their systems. They were both in their 40s.

One male, 57 years old, was a pedestrian in a hit and run crash. Took place on 7th Street. The pedestrian did have alcohol in his system.

One crash involved a semi-truck driven by a 31-year-old male. He was restrained. The single vehicle crash occurred on Highway 69 at mile marker 26.5.

One crash involved a 67-year-old unrestrained driver. The single vehicle crash occurred at Highway 69 and County Road 524. The driver did have marijuana in his system.

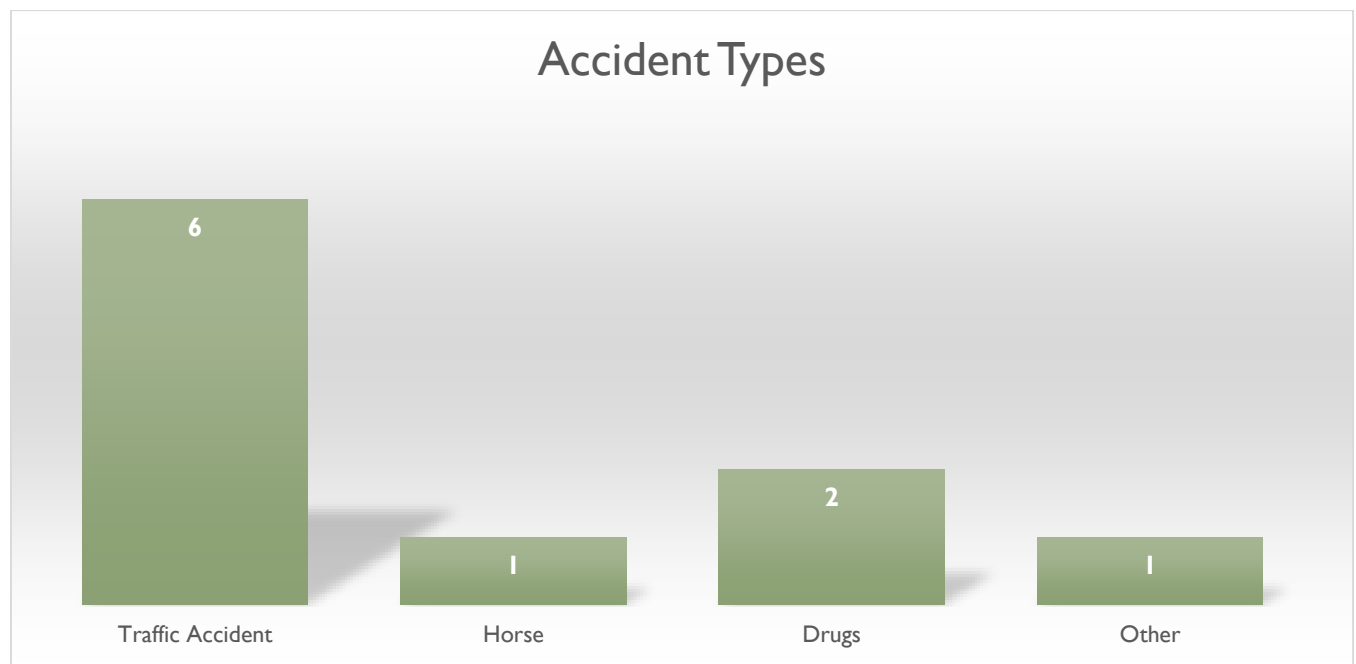
One crash involved a 24-year-old unrestrained driver. The single vehicle crash happened on northbound Interstate 25. The driver had fentanyl, marijuana, amphetamine and methamphetamine in his system.

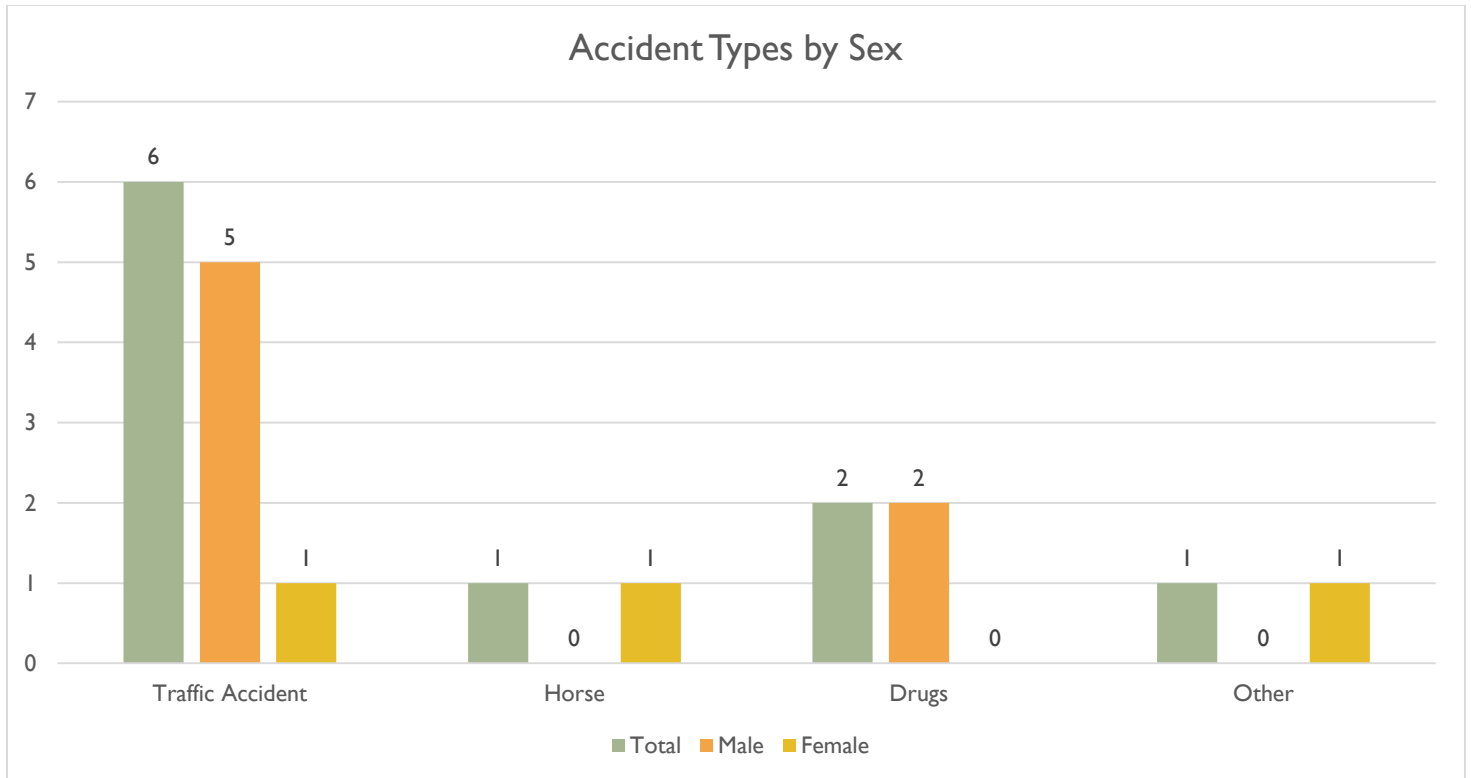
One of the accidents involved a 56-year-old female who was kicked by a horse and sustained head trauma and rib fractures.

One of the incidents involved a 32-year-old female who had preeclampsia, was pregnant and had a methamphetamine intoxication.

One incident involved a 64-year-old who died from a mixture of cocaine and alcohol intoxication.

One incident involved a 27-year-old who died from the toxic effects of fentanyl.





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 were two suicides in Huerfano County in 2023. One suicide was a male who sustained a gunshot wound to the head. He was a 62-year-old. He was positive for alcohol. One suicide was a female who sustained a gunshot to the head. She was a 44-year-old. She was positive for methamphetamines and amphetamines.

HOMICIDES

A homicide is a death resulting from injuries inflicted by another person (explicit or implicit). There were 2 homicides in all of 2023. One was a 69-year-old male who sustained blunt force trauma to the chest. One was a 64-year-old female who sustained blunt force trauma.

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 2023, there were no undetermined deaths.

Undetermined can be changed if more information is obtained.

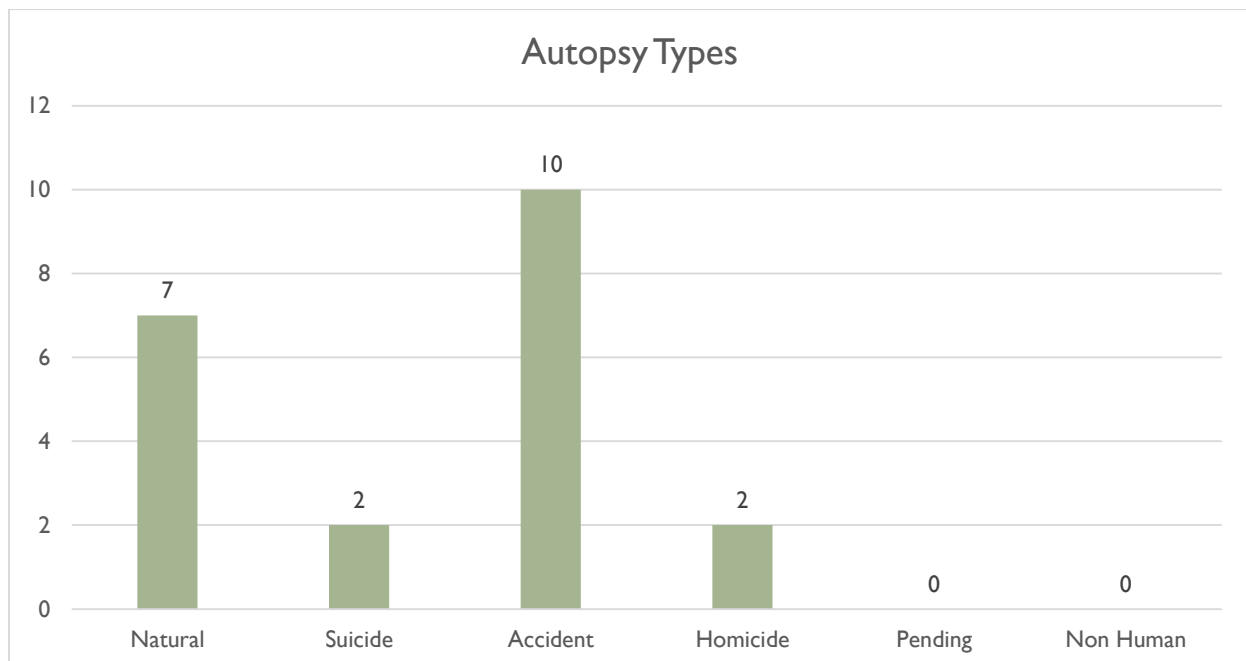


PENDING

In 2023, there were no open cases being investigated.

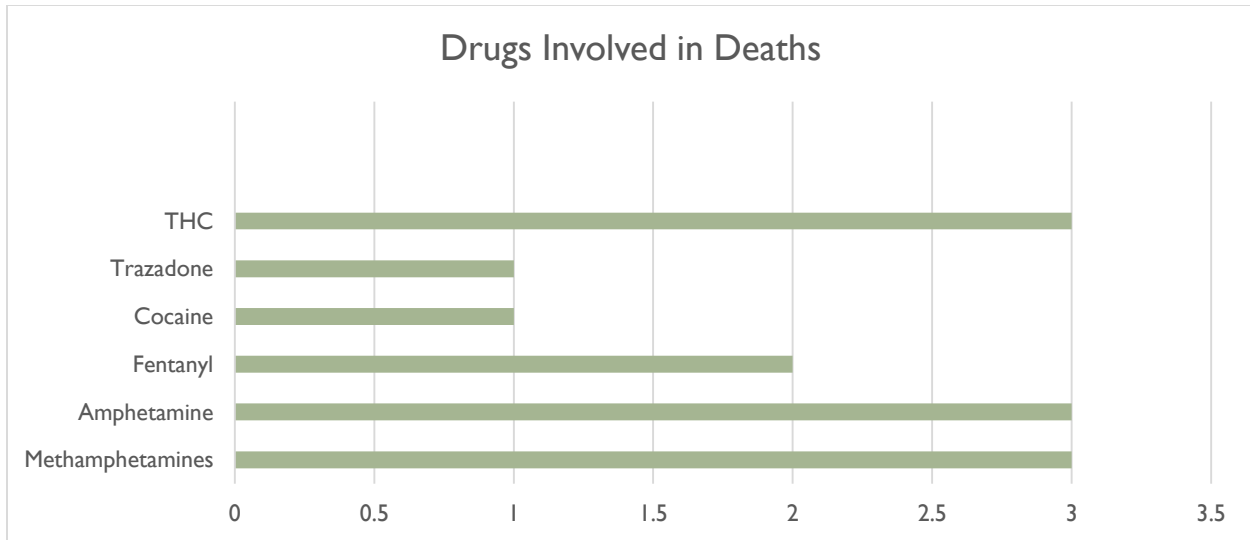
AUTOPSY INFORMATION

Of the 109 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 21 autopsies in 2023.



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 2023 year, it has been a very small number, being only .055% of all direct deaths. In a total of 6 deaths, drugs were found in the system.



2023 MISCELLANEOUS CORONER CALLS AND INFORMATION

The Huerfano County Coroner's Office covered 5 Green Burials on private land in 2023. 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 was 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.

