

Testimony for House Bill No. 2088

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of the amendments to House Bill No. 2088. This all started when Dr. Suzan Schaeffer was doing doctoral thesis research under my supervision at the Dauphin County Forensic Center. During here exposure as an intern at the forensic center she recognized that sometimes we would incur difficulty in tracking and finding next of kin of the decease in the process of a medicolegal death investigation. Partially using data from our data base and exposure to our day-to-day investigative process she saw the need to access to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation under Title 75 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes. It is my hope that I can explain why this need exists in the process of medicolegal death investigation.

Primary Role of the Coroner's Office

To understand the need for access to this data one must understand the nature and role of the coroner's office in determining the **cause** and **manner** of death in any death that falls under the jurisdiction of the coroner.

These deaths are, deaths that are accidental, homicide, suicide, natural or when a physician is unable to certify. There are also cases such as infectious disease and prison deaths where the coroner is notified and determines jurisdiction after notification.

The end goal is to determine the Cause and Manner of death using scientific methodology. The conclusion is then based on reasonable medical and investigative certainty. This process is done with a multifaceted team of forensic personnel such as forensic pathologists, toxicologists, medicolegal investigators, and other forensic specialties. The resulting certification is then determined to be the official cause and manner of death on a state death certificate filed at the department of vital statistics. The State has 67 Coroner offices which are either hybrid lay Coroners who are medicolegal investigators or Medical Examiner Systems who physicians but not necessarily forensic pathologist. The role of coroner either way is one which inculcates the roles of administration of the office, investigations, medicolegal investigation supervision, liaison to police, medical community, first responders and the populist of the county they serve.

All these functions take place within the powers of criminal and civil processes. The coroner and the investigators are sworn officers of the court. The coroner's office is charged with the protection of the deceased's estate until such

time that the next of kin are notified and proper probate is established. The office is also the key player in all evidence on or about the body and thus cooperates with the District Attorney's and police in cases other than natural causes. The office of the coroner is autonomous from these offices so that an independent analysis is more likely which is important when deaths are related to governmental actions or in governmental facilities.

Why is Next of Kin Data Important?

Medicolegal death investigation is a process that is time sensitive, data collection oriented and evidence collection documented. The process must be completely documented within the rules of chain of evidence. The primary need is to first identify the decease and then to determine the next of kin. This process is both to obtain history of the decease and determine who has the decision-making rights over the estate until probate is completed. All the above give directionality to the investigative process and aid in a successful outcome with out evidence bias or civil authority confusion.

Are Coroners Capable of Securing and Controlling Data Obtained?

The answer to the above question is an emphatic “Yes”. Under Title 16 of the County Code coroners have broad subpoena power and are very aware of restrictions of disclosure under HIPPA. We work with medical information daily as well as being charged with the process of next of kin notification. Most of the time it is the coroner who will notify the next of kin unless the notification is at a distant location, in which case, the coroner will contact a police department or a coroner’s office in the locality where the next of kin resides.

The timeliness of the notification in this world of television and internet is extremely important. Death investigators and police are familiar with the thanatological stages of grieving and are experience in notifying such a tragic message.

CONCLUSION

I sincerely encourage the passage of this amendment. As a primary officer of the court in the process of investigation of death coroner’s and their deputies should have access to the pertinent information in this data base in the process of there investigation. It is the role of the coroner to have and control access on the

evidence on or about the body. This data base gives us much needed evidence of who the next of kin are and thus enable us to build a profile of the decease. The information gives of access to important family history, genetic resources, and protection of the family from finding out about the death of a loved one through social media or television.

Thank you for your time and cooperation in this matter.

Graham S. Hetrick, MS, F.D. B.C.F.E.

Dauphin County Coroner



Healthcare Policy Analysis: Next of Kin Contact Information on Driver's License and its Use in Emergency Notification

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Clinical Preceptors



School of Nursing

Disclaimer

Due to the sensitive nature of this project, the pictures used within this healthcare policy analysis project presentation are used with the permission of the original photographer or owner of the photograph.

Leadership *Defined...*



Healthcare Problem

- Increase in number of unclaimed decedents in Pennsylvania Counties
- Increase in opioid deaths
- Inability to identify/notify next of kin
- Inability of family to make burial decisions
- Lack of family closure
- Taxpayer burden related to increasing cost of cremation

Leadership *Defined...*



Setting and Population

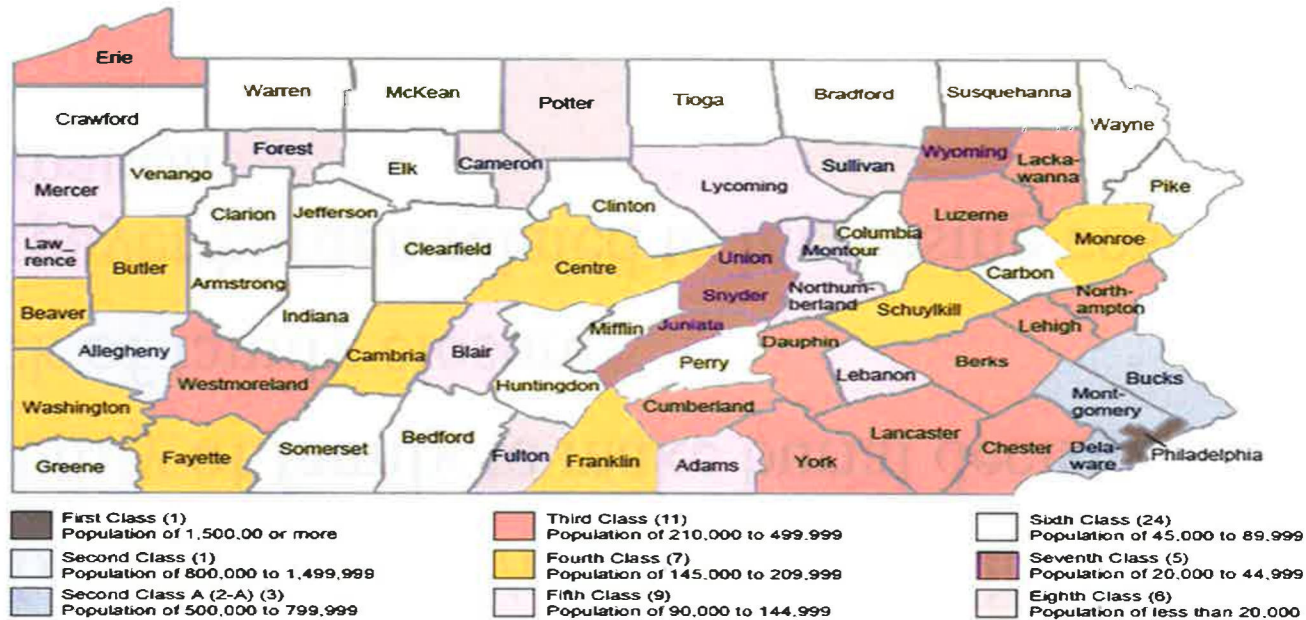


Image 2. Map of Pennsylvania Counties (2015) <https://printable-maps.blogspot.com/2015/05/map-of-pennsylvania-counties.htm>

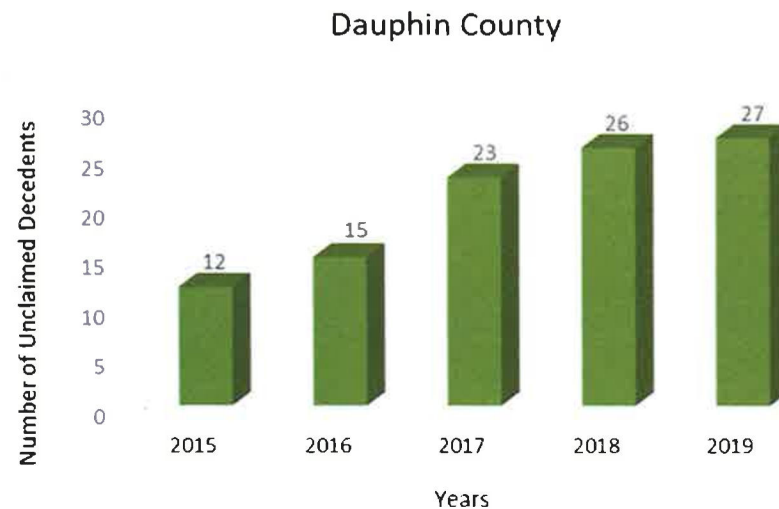
- Setting
 - Pennsylvania Third and Fifth Class County Coroner Offices
 - Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Population
 - Decedent in Third-Class and Fifth-Class Pennsylvania Counties
 - Projections of decedents across all 67 counties

Leadership *Defined...*



Project Background

- Montgomery County - in 2015 compared to 2014: there was a 19% increase in unclaimed decedents: (Frolik, 2015).
- Dauphin County 26 unclaimed decedents 2018: increase of three decedents compared 2017 (Vendel, 2019).



Leadership *Defined...*

Identification of:

- Stakeholders
 - Coroners
 - County Commissioners
 - Decedent families
 - Funeral homes
 - Legislator
 - Governor
 - Pennsylvania citizens
 - Pennsylvania Dept. of Transportation
 - Police Departments
 - Community bereavement services
 - Emergency Medical Services
 - Emergency Departments
- Team members
 - DNP faculty mentor
 - 2 Forensic Experts from Dauphin County Coroner Office
 - Police Chief Expert
 - Solicitor PA. State Coroners Association
- Topic Contributors
 - Decedent family member
 - Pennsylvania legislative member
 - Project sponsor
 - Project supporters

Leadership *Defined...*



Synthesis of Findings

- **Non- research**

- TIFF's Initiative - 17 million next of kin in Florida
- Dauphin County, unclaimed decedent count increasing every year since 2014 (Vendel, 2019).
 - Hetrick, substantiates in 2017: 23 unclaimed decedents (Vendel, 2019)
 - Hetrick, substantiates in 2018: 26 unclaimed decedents (Vendel, 2019)
- Dauphin County Coroner opioid epidemic statistics: 104 deaths in 2017 and 2018 had 128 opioid deaths, increase of 23% as compared to 2017 (Vendel, 2019)

- **Research**

- Opioid deaths had increased 242% between 1991 and 2010 (Gomes et al., 2014)
- Coroner offices cremate unclaimed bodies, the burial of ashes done in mass graves (Rugg and Holland, 2017)
- Burden of latent family notification and failure to provide closure to these to families (Castex, 2007)

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Two Key Project Terms

Pennsylvania Justice Network aka JNET



Penn College Police (2005)

Potter's Field



To Inform Families First (TIFF) : Florida's Next Of Kin Initiative

- History of TIFF
- Implementation on October 6, 2006
- Emergency Contact Information link placed as part of the application for Florida driver's license and identification cards
- Zero to 17 million next of kin registrants, which continues to rise
- Olsen states that there are "at least one million new registrants annually in Florida"



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 **DUQUESNE**
UNIVERSITY
School of Nursing

Florida's D.O.T. Emergency Contact Information Registrations

From Zero to Over 16 Million in 14 Years !

Month Year	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
2020	15,988,053	16,097,527	16,168,919	16,177,745	16,233,866	16,327,234	16,419,446	16,514,652	16,615,163			
2019	14,675,146	14,779,378	14,892,010	15,000,404	15,108,381	15,219,658	15,343,830	15,460,561	15,559,813	15,674,768	15,769,003	15,870,316
2018	13,274,086	13,384,674	13,507,633	13,619,155	13,735,073	13,858,811	13,988,105	14,127,106	14,234,576	14,358,076	14,462,661	14,557,777
2017	11,835,933	12,046,048	12,163,861	12,263,462	12,372,230	12,491,512	12,606,664	12,731,992	12,815,211	12,936,871	13,046,363	13,152,531
2016	10,739,199	10,838,028	10,940,031	11,029,163	11,115,670	11,221,558	11,325,840	11,440,741	11,539,540	11,639,753	11,735,658	11,835,933
2015	9,525,228	9,612,783	9,700,910	9,794,804	9,884,882	9,966,977	10,068,770	10,170,907	10,268,095	10,458,156	10,547,987	10,648,374
2014	8,254,656	8,379,467	8,491,657	8,609,504	8,718,866	8,822,432	8,933,984	9,052,393	9,162,724	9,265,635	9,364,599	9,438,342
2013	6,858,885	6,985,506	7,105,996	7,229,845	7,348,884	7,466,955	7,581,941	7,710,486	7,836,451	7,943,363	8,055,138	8,150,093
2012	5,370,335	5,489,669	5,611,379	5,736,960	5,859,307	5,984,384	6,113,853	6,251,318	6,393,756	6,513,559	6,644,272	6,755,857
2011	4,072,815	4,176,718	4,279,517	4,392,277	4,492,150	4,593,467	4,707,703	4,819,314	4,942,206	5,051,661	5,158,925	5,262,915
2010	2,988,871	3,068,496	3,157,387	3,256,984	3,327,799	3,392,326	3,471,726	3,571,065	3,677,830	3,776,568	3,878,931	3,974,154
2009	1,726,660	1,830,132	1,930,130	2,038,629	2,139,163	2,228,618	2,333,253	2,449,679	2,601,703	2,694,340	2,792,285	2,877,215
2008	843,848	893,133	934,975	971,811	1,012,593	1,054,168	1,102,571	1,212,470	1,313,040	1,422,998	1,539,932	1,626,979
2007	391,285	418,774	439,067	456,088	468,130	483,137	499,984	562,049	632,140	684,454	744,901	798,007

Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (2020)

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Policy Recommendations

Through a healthcare policy analysis format, this project will:

- Compare the Florida TIFF initiative to Pennsylvania next of kin notification process
- Use the Bardach and Rodriguez-Garcia models to substantiate the data necessary for policy analysis and change in Pennsylvania
- Raise awareness for the need of next of kin notification in Pennsylvania
- Establish a communication plan to notify Pennsylvanians on the availability to the emergency contact link (aka next of kin) link on PennDOT's existing site.

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Purpose Statement for Healthcare Policy Analysis

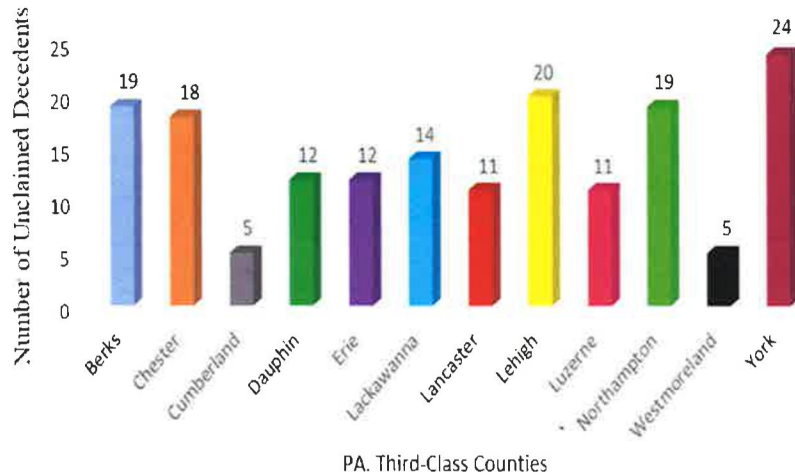
- To conduct a scholarly healthcare policy analysis, which can aide in changing current practice in Pennsylvania
 - To decrease the number of unclaimed decedents in all 67 Pennsylvania Counties
 - To return the decedent to their families for burial and closure
 - To decrease decedent care cost in all 67 Pennsylvania Counties

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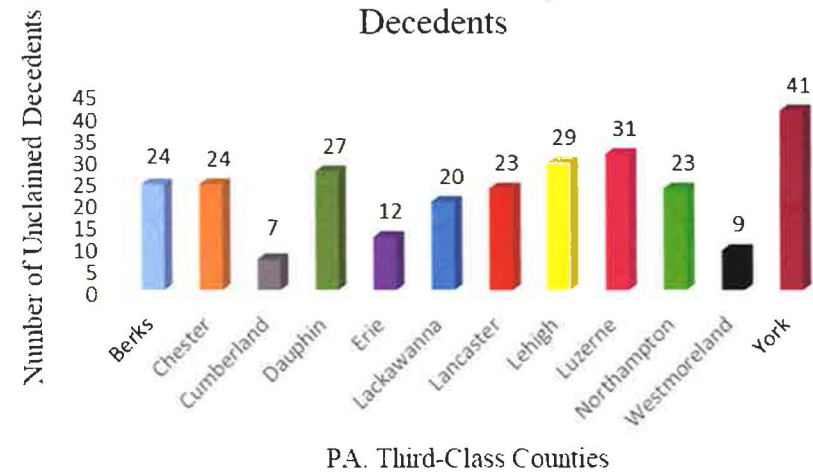


Unclaimed Decedents: 2015 Compared to 2019

2015 PA. Third-Class County Unclaimed Decedents



2019 PA. Third-Class County Unclaimed Decedents



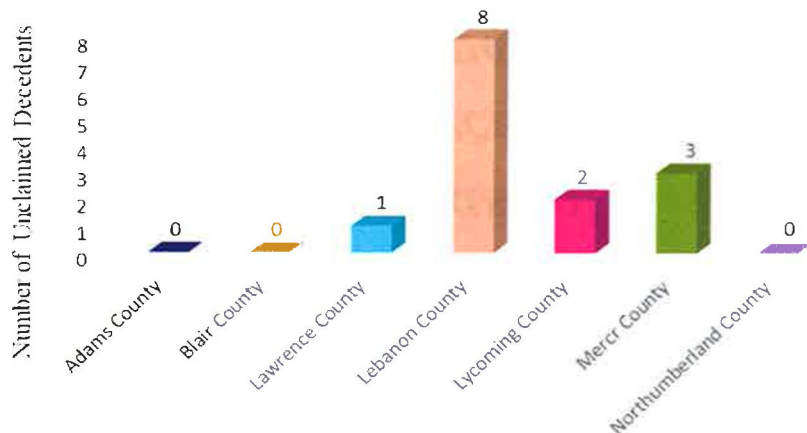
54% increase of unclaimed decedents over a 5 yr period

Leadership Defined...



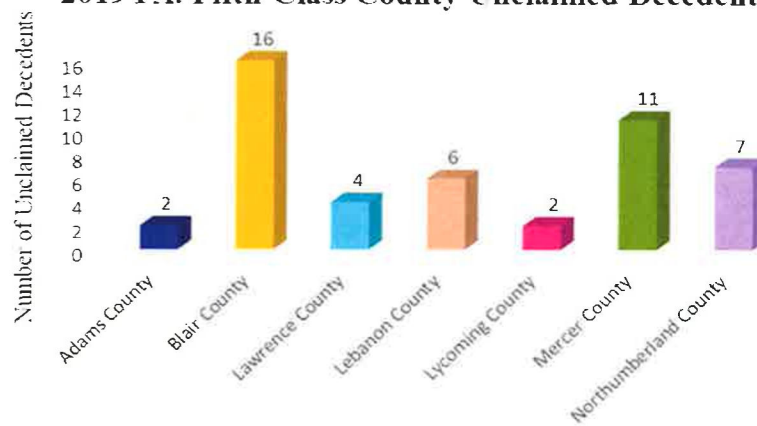
Unclaimed Decedents: 2015 Compared to 2019

2015 PA. Fifth-Class County Unclaimed Decedents



PA. Fifth-Class Counties

2019 PA. Fifth-Class County Unclaimed Decedents



PA. Fifth-Class Counties

29% increase of unclaimed decedents over a 5 yr period

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AIM 3 - JNET Implementation

Develop criteria for JNET implementation in order to access next of kin contact information in Pennsylvania

Objectives:

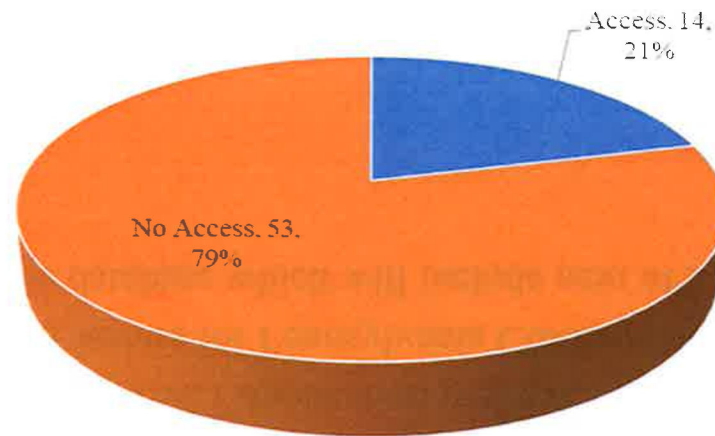
1. Survey the existing number of Pennsylvania Coroner's that have JNET access
2. Implementation of JNET application process
3. Establish JNET access for Pennsylvania Coroners through PennDOT's driver's license database which will include next of kin contact information

Leadership *Defined...*

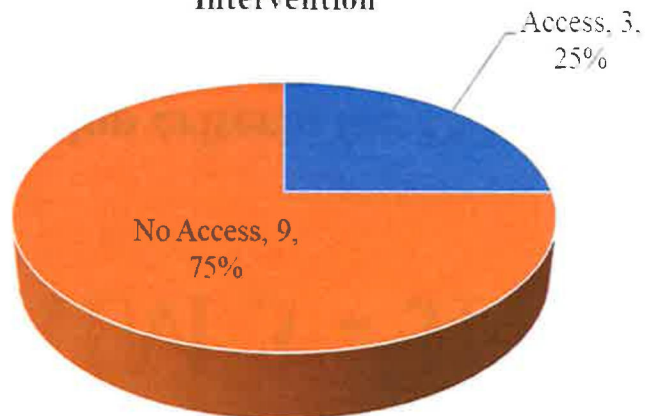


Pre-JNET Intervention

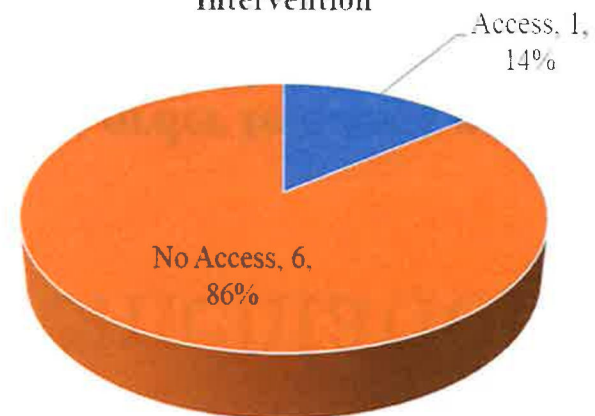
67 PA. County - Pre-JNET Intervention



PA. Third-Class County - Pre-JNET Intervention



PA. Fifth-Class County - Pre-JNET Intervention



JNET Application Process

Directions

I. Accessing JNET

A. Go to: <https://www.pajnet.pa.gov>

1. Click on “Who we serve”
2. Then, click “New Agencies”

B. Locate PDF form entitled “Agency Access Request Form”

Complete request form

Return form to:

Todd Sackett, JNET Communication Manager

@ tsackett@pa.gov

717-214-7459

II. Trouble shooting access problems

- A. Find out who in your county is the JNET Coordinator
- B. Have JNET County Coordinator assist if application is rejected
- C. Unable to identify JNET County Coordinator, contact Todd Sackett, JNET Communication Manager
- D. Contact the Pennsylvania Coroner’s Association for further guidance

Related Information

JNET access will be limited to the driver’s license screen and photo’s

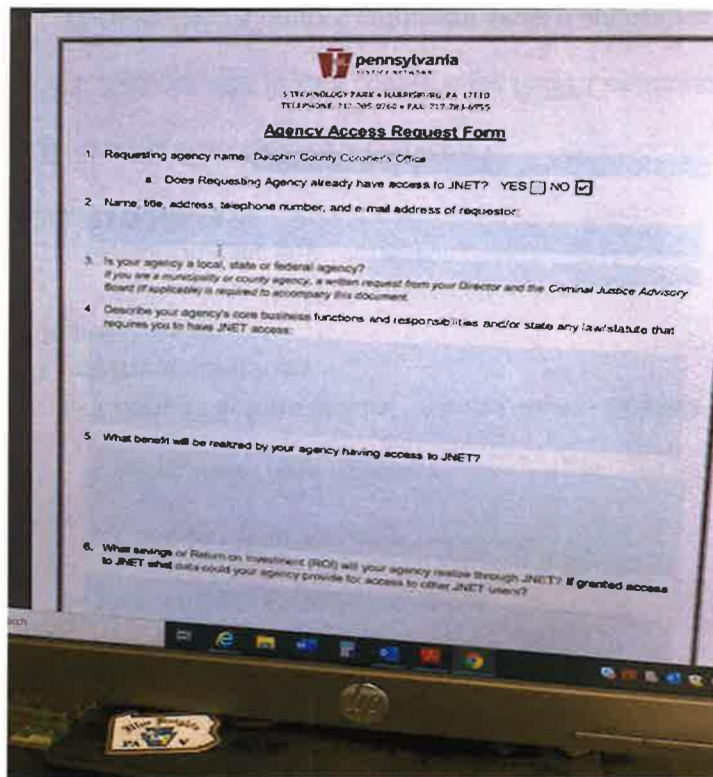
If next of kin contact information is added to the Pennsylvania driver’s license, it is this associations goal to have access for county coroners as well. Updates on this issue TBA.

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Completing the JNET Application

JNET Application



The screenshot shows a computer monitor displaying the 'Agency Access Request Form' from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The form is titled 'Agency Access Request Form' and includes the following questions:

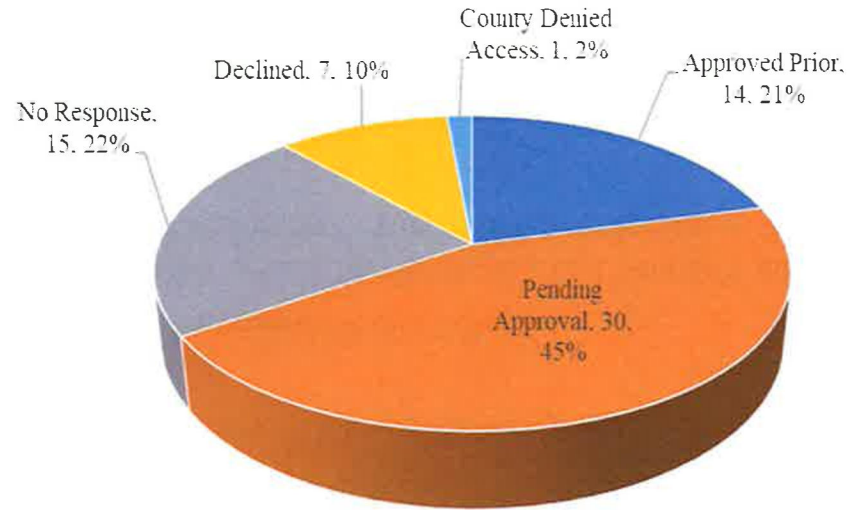
1. Requesting agency name: Dauphin County Coroner's Office
a. Does Requesting Agency already have access to JNET? YES NO
2. Name, title, address, telephone number, and e-mail address of requestor:
3. Is your agency a local, state or federal agency?
If you are a municipality or county agency, a written request from your Director and the Criminal Justice Advisory Board (if applicable) is required to accompany this document.
4. Describe your agency's core business functions and responsibilities and/or state any law/statute that requires you to have JNET access:
5. What benefit will be realized by your agency having access to JNET?
6. What savings or Return on Investment (ROI) will your agency realize through JNET? If granted access to JNET what data could your agency provide for access to other JNET users?

Completing Application

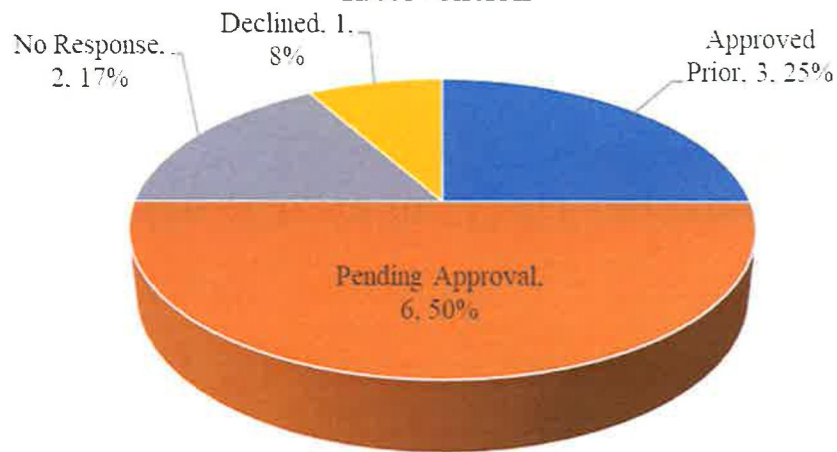


Post-JNET Intervention

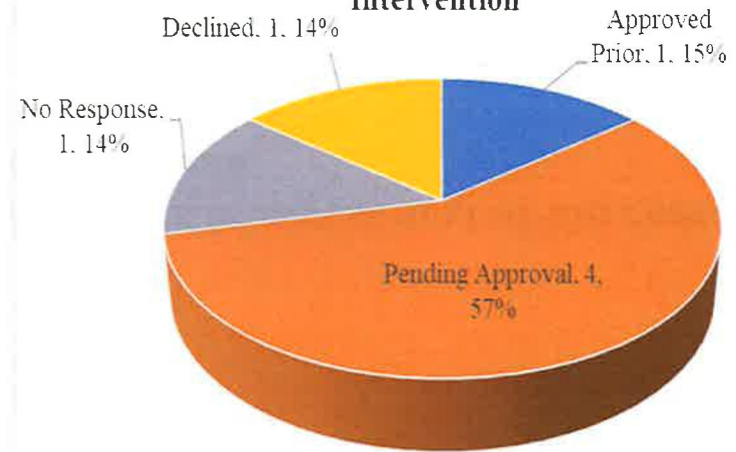
67 PA. County - Post-JNET Intervention



PA. Third-Class County - Post-JNET Intervention



PA. Fifth-Class County - Post-JNET Intervention



Results: AIM 3

Develop criteria for JNET implementation in order to access next of kin contact information in Pennsylvania

1. **Objective:** Survey the existing number of Pennsylvania Coroner's that have JNET access

Results:

- 14 of 67 (21%) counties acknowledged having JNET access
- All 67 counties responded to initial inquiry.

2. **Objective:** Implementation of JNET application process

Results:

- Directions were disseminated to all 67 counties

3. **Objective:** Establish JNET access for Pennsylvania Coroner's through PennDOT's driver's license database which will include next of kin contact information

Results:

- 30 counties (45%) in Pennsylvania are pending JNET approval.

AIM 3 - Met

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AIM 4

Weigh project outcomes and create final policy recommendations

Objectives:

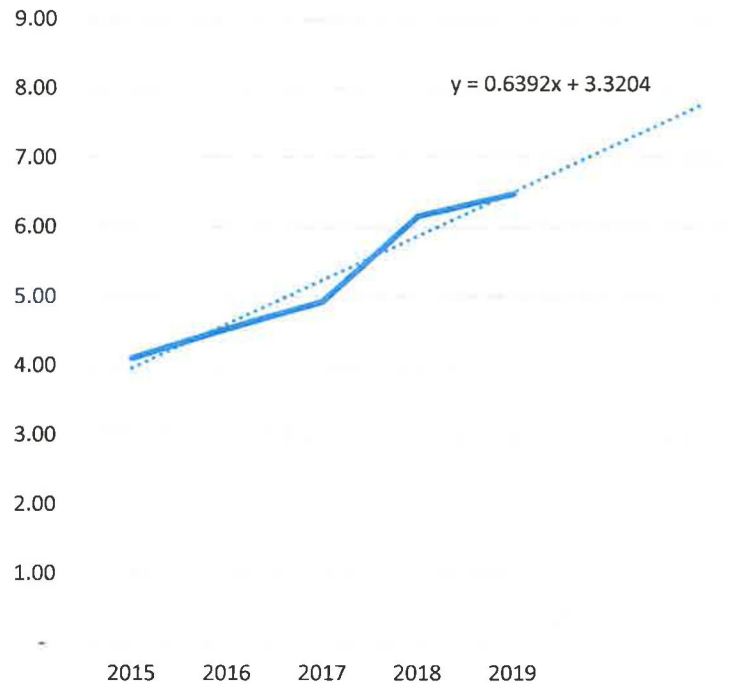
1. Evaluate stakeholder feedback
2. Implement policy recommendations that are relevant, progressive, efficient, and impactful based on data collected
3. Cost benefit analysis in healthcare policy analysis
4. Create a projection of unclaimed decedent populations across all 67 counties based on a conservative estimate of 12.5, 25 and 50%.
5. Legislative collaboration

Leadership *Defined...*

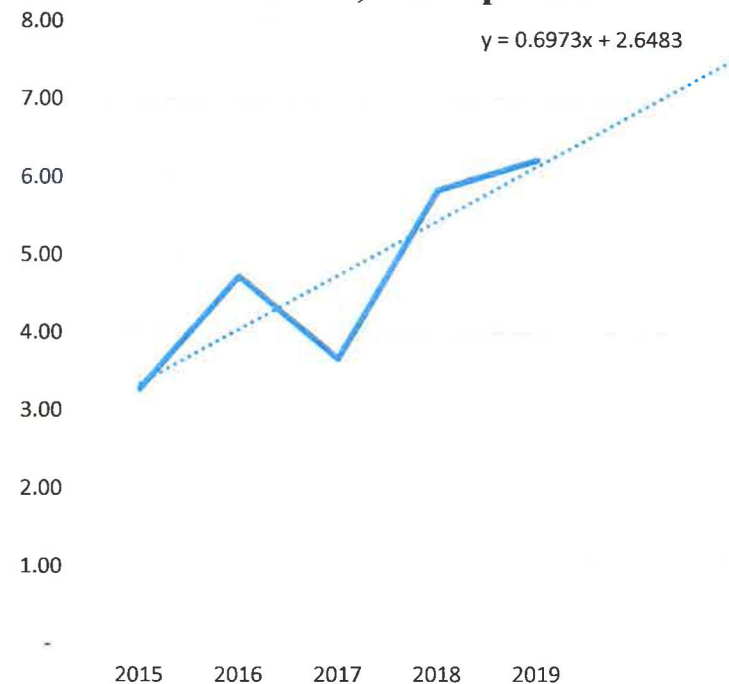


Predictive Analytics

**Third-Class Pennsylvania County
Predictive Analytics
Per 100,000 Population**



**Fifth-Class Pennsylvania County
Predictive Analytics
Per 100,000 Population**



— : denotes collected data

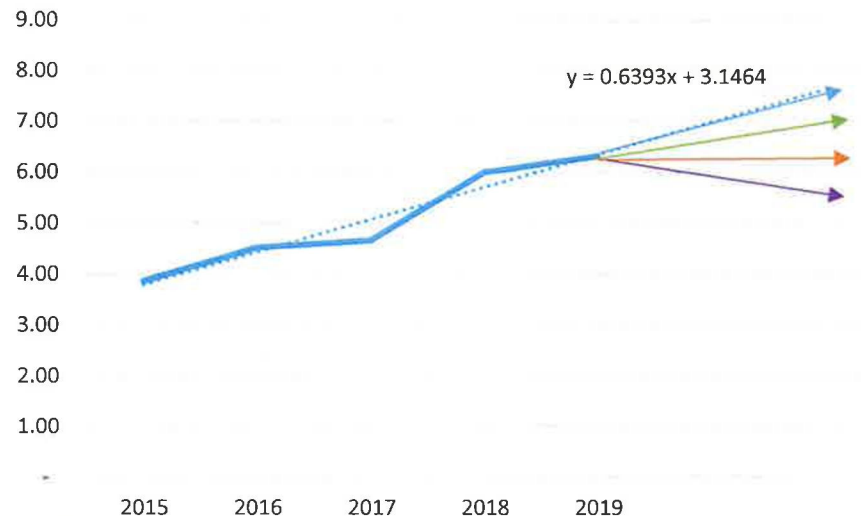
- - - : denotes increase in unclaimed decedents overtime

Leadership *Defined...*



Pennsylvania Decedent Projection per 100K Population

67 Pennsylvania Predictive Analytics



- — :denotes collected data
- - - - :denotes increase in unclaimed bodies
- — :denotes 12.5% decrease (1st year of implementation)
- — :denotes 25% decrease (2nd year of implementation)
- — :denotes 50% decrease (3rd year of implementation)

The average projection of unclaimed decedents within all 67 counties was 6.32 on average

Leadership Defined...



Legislative Collaboration

PA House of Representative
Collaboration through Rep. Sue Helm
(104th District):

- Will inquire the status on the JNET applications that were submitted
- Will request that PennDOT display the emergency contact information system link in a more prominent location on the PennDOT website
- Will request that PennDOT's online application/renewal forms for PA driver's licenses and identification cards will prompt for next of kin information
- DMV clerks will ask customers to list next of kin on data entry process during in person registration/application



Leadership *Defined...*

Results: AIM 4

Weigh project outcomes and create final policy recommendations

1. **Objective:** Evaluate stakeholder feedback

Results:

- Presented at the Pennsylvania State Coroners Association Annual meeting

2. **Objective:** Implement policy recommendations that are relevant, progressive, efficient, & impactful based on data collected

Results:

- Policy recommendations were shared with stakeholders
- Health care policy analyses to address next of kin contact information
- Concerns by stakeholders in personal care, assisted living and long-term care facilities.

3. **Objective:** Cost benefit analysis in healthcare policy analysis

Results:

- Cost benefit analysis was assessed based on current trends
- County cost per decedent, \$250.00 to \$2500.00

4. **Objective:** Create a projection of unclaimed decedent populations across all 67 counties

Results:

- Projections were completed based on data known and unknown
- 6.32 representing the median number of unclaimed decedent increase annually (\$1580.00 - \$15,800.00)

5. **Objective:** Legislative collaboration

Results:

- Request that PennDOT display the emergency contact information system link in a more prominent location
- PennDOT's online application/renewal forms for PA driver's licenses and identification cards will prompt for next of kin information
- DMV clerks will ask customers to list next of kin on data entry process during in person registration/application

Leadership Defined...



AIM 4 - Met

Potential Barriers & Overcoming Barriers

- Potential Barriers
 - PennDOT cooperation
 - JNET and PennDOT approving JNET access to PA. Coroners
 - PennDOT willingness to allow changes to website
- Overcoming Barriers
 - Educate PennDOT on the importance of moving the link
 - Media campaign to provide awareness to PA. residents regarding next of kin designation capability on PA. driver's licenses & state issued identification cards
 - Follow up by the PA. State Coroners Association after policy analysis completion

Leadership *Defined...*



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Leadership Defined...



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Leadership Defined...



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Leadership Defined...



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Approved:

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Dedicated To



**Loving Memory of Our Angel Children
Tiffiany, Sarah, and Billy**



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Questions

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