

# Unclaimed Remains A Concern

## COUNTIES DIFFER ON HOW TO HANDLE SITUATION

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STAFF PHOTO DAN HOLTMEYER

Washington County Coroner Roger Morris sorts through the medication of someone who recently died, standard procedure to see if medications contributed to the person's death. He and his deputies will respond to more than 2,000 deaths by the end of the year, he said.

AT A GLANCE

## Washington County Unclaimed Remains

Coroner Roger Morris is holding onto the unclaimed, cremated remains of the following people. He said he hoped releasing their names might catch the attention of friends or family members in the area. The coroner can be reached at 444-1730. Jeff Antoine Bruce Barr Brian Boggs David Bradshaw Ronald Davis John Nash Mona Robinson Paul Sharp Terry Waits Susan Whooten Unknown Male

Source: WaShington county coroner



STAFF PHOTO DAN HOLTMEYER

The cremated remains of an unknown man who died in early 2011 sit in a plain box in the Washington County Coroner's office, unclaimed by any person or funeral home. Coroner Roger Morris keeps the unclaimed remains of 11 people in such temporary containers. Their friends and families either don't want them, can't get to them or can't be found, he said.

**FAYETTEVILLE** — In a steelgray cabinet in the Washington County coroner's office sit about a dozen cubeshaped cardboard boxes, their flaps sealed with clear tape. Each holds a clear plastic bag filled with someone's ashes, like gray sand flecked with black and white.

Most have names — Susan, Jeff, Bruce. All were at least in their 50s and died sometime in the last few years, said Roger Morris, coroner. No one has come to pick them up. This rarely happened until about 2010, Morris said. One by

one they've come to stay in their boxes.

“That bothers me every night. I don't like it one bit,” Morris said last week in his building, which sits near the jail and has all-white walls, three offices and candles and scented oils on the tables to ward off the faint, acidic odor of two dead bodies in the cooler room. “It's just getting more and more.”

Morris and his four parttime deputies respond to five or six deaths every day of the year, about half of the county's deaths. They confirm cause of death by quickly examining bodies for injuries and to see if they've been moved and running blood tests for drugs and other substances. Some bodies might be sent for an autopsy at the Arkansas Crime Lab in Little Rock if more investigation is needed.

The height of summer and winter tend to be the busiest times for the coroner's office because of extreme weather and an uptick in suicides during the holidays, Morris said.

Families or a funeral home claim nearly all of the bodies. Those who aren't claimed end up waiting in the office, where Morris and the deputies walk briskly in and out of the door and answer phones that seem to ring constantly. Morris was first elected coroner in 2002.

Sometimes the family knows about the person but doesn't want their body, Morris said. “He ran off 20 years ago and I never seen him since' — we get a lot of that.” Other times friends and family simply can't afford to get them, either because of distance or the cost of a funeral, which can be several thousand dollars. Still other times, Morris and police officers can't track down any family members at all.

They haven't found any relatives for Mona Robinson, for example. Her body was one of two in the cooler Nov. 20, zipped away in bright yellow body bags that couldn't contain the stench of decomposition, delayed as it was by the low temperatures. She'd been in there since August, and she was being taken for cremation because the health risks of holding the body had become too great. Cremations can cost a few hundred dollars.

The remains of a man who has not been identified have been in the office for almost four years. He seemed to be homeless and in ill health when he died and was left on a bus by two other homeless people, Morris said. The two probably wanted to make sure someone took care of the man's body, Morris said. He doesn't suspect foul play. Little else is known about the man except he was between 40 and 70 years old. DNA testing against federal databases turned up nothing.

Occasional calls from someone in Texas about the man give Morris hope someone eventually will come for him.

Morris said he holds off on cremation as long as possible in case a family member or friend comes and wants a regular burial. He had reached one friend of Robinson's who seemed promising, he said.

He hopes to build a wall or path with niches and name plates for the cremated remains, though the county's budget cuts for next year make the project unlikely for now. The coroner's budget dropped from about \$280,000 this year to \$263,000 in 2015, less than half a percent of county spending. Morris said he's working with the county's Information Services department to get the names online as well.

What Morris won't do is give up, he said. Morris' father worked in the funeral and coroner business all his life, he said. For the people in this line of work, who see death every day, someone going unclaimed after death can seem particularly galling.

“They're just as important as the person who had a hundred friends and family,” said Jennifer Pifer, one of the deputy coroners who also works as a hospice nurse. “Everybody deserves dignity.”

In contrast, Benton County adopted a set timeline for handling remains in 2009, when Daniel Oxford became coroner. Cremation happens after about a week. Burial or scattering of the ashes occurs after six months.

Three men are unclaimed in Oxford's office, he said by phone last week. He hasn't had to bury anyone after the six-month deadline so far.

"I would hope that a family member could come back and I could present them with those cremains, if they take care of the bill per the policy," Oxford said. "I hate to just have to take them out to the cemetery and bury them in a pauper's grave."

At the time, Benton County's policy was the only one of its kind in the state. Pat Moore, coroner of Faulkner County and president of the Arkansas Coroner's Association, said it might still be that way, though he couldn't say for sure.

"It's up to the individual coroner because there is no state regulation or protocol or anything like that," Moore said. "I've been doing this 26 years, and not until about three years ago did I have an unclaimed body."

Moore's office has the cremated remains of three people. Why the recent increase came isn't clear, he said, but he suspected the answer is more complicated than just population growth. People these days are more mobile in their search for jobs or education because of the economy, he said.

It isn't clear how many bodies are unclaimed in Arkansas, because the U.S. Justice Department's Unclaimed Persons Database doesn't show anyone in Arkansas. The department's Unidentified Persons Database shows 107 in Arkansas, unchanged from three years ago.

Morris also blamed more movement for Washington County's increase, saying more homeless people are coming south from Chicago and north from Texas. Not everyone who's unclaimed was homeless, however, he added. Oxford said he hadn't seen much of an increase in Benton County.

"We see families a little more reluctant to take responsibility, but our volume has not really increased that much," Oxford said. Usually a church or relative eventually takes the remains, he said.

Morris is hoping for something similar. But no one has come yet for remains once they've been there for a few months, he said. The friend of Robinson, the woman who was waiting in the body bag, hasn't been heard from for about a month.

"She's disappeared on us," Morris said.