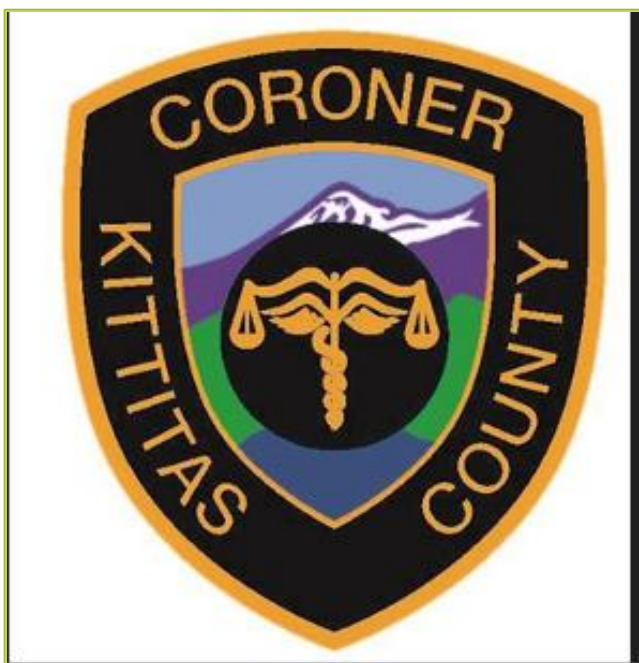
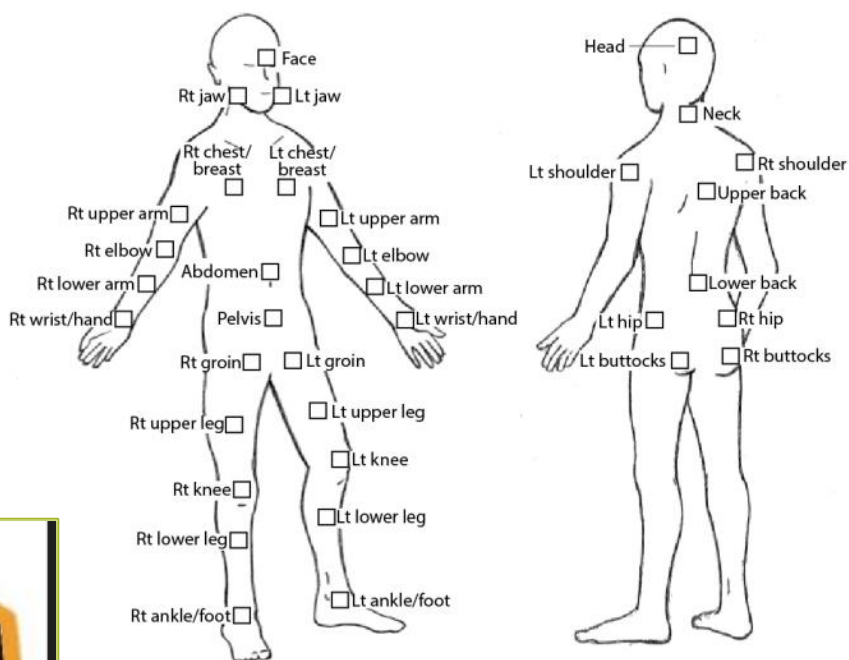


2023

# Kittitas County Coroner's Report



Nick Henderson

Kittitas County Coroner

1/1/2023

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## Introduction

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Kittitas County Board of Commissioners for their support of the coroner’s office and the medicolegal death investigations conducted by my office for the citizens of Kittitas County.

## Purpose

The Kittitas County Coroner’s Office was created March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014, by adoption of county resolution 2014-049<sup>1</sup>. However, due to the need for an election the coroner did not take office until January 1, 2015.

Kittitas County ranges from the Cascade Mountains at Snoqualmie Pass to the shrub step of Vantage. Population has grown from 2105 to an estimated 43,120 to 45,508 in 2023.<sup>2</sup> The geographical jurisdiction of the Coroner’s Office extends to the entire county, including incorporated cities, waterways, and the Kittitas County Corrections Center.

<sup>1</sup> Kittitas County Board of Commissioners Office: <https://www.co.kittitas.wa.us/uploads/bocc/resolutions/2014-049-resolution.pdf>  
<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kittitascountywashington,WA/PST045222>



## Mission and Role

The mission of the Kittitas County Coroner's Office is to serve and protect the interests of the community by determining the cause, manner, and mechanism of sudden or unexplained deaths. To identify deceased persons and notify their next of kin, regardless of where they may live in the world. To ensure the deceased and their property are treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

We accomplish our mission with a team of medicolegal certified investigators and forensically certified pathologists. Through scientific methods of inquiry, we serve as an independent finder of fact, working alongside, but independently from law enforcement investigators. We complete our investigations compassionately and make every effort to provide information to the loved ones of those who have died. Death data collected by our investigation is reported to local, state, and federal health departments to help keep our community safe.

## Associations and Certifications

- Member of Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (WACME)
- Member of International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME)
- Certified Diplomats of American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI)
- Certified Washington State Criminal Justice Training Center Medicolegal Death Investigators
- Cribs for Kids Partner
- CWU Internship Program promoting Forensic Sciences

## Legislative Authority

Washington uses a mixed system of death investigation with some counties employing coroners and some employing medical examiners. Kittitas County operates under the coroner system. Medical examiners are appointed. Coroners are elected officials. Coroners are not usually required to be physicians, but requirements vary by jurisdiction.

The jurisdiction of the coroner is established by Washington State Law and Kittitas County Code:

|                   |                                   |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| RCW Chapter 36.16 | County Officers                   |
| RCW Chapter 36.24 | County Coroner                    |
| RCW Chapter 68.50 | Human Remains                     |
| WAC 246-500-020   | Contact with Human Remains        |
| WAC 246-500-040   | Transportation of Human Remains   |
| RCW 36.39.030     | Disposition of Indigent Remains   |
| RCW 73.08.070     | County Burial of Indigent Remains |

## Separate and Independent Authority and Jurisdiction

Coroner investigations into the cause and manner of death are parallel to, but separate from, police investigations.

The jurisdiction of a county coroner under the first clause of RCW 68.08.010 extends to the body of a deceased person in the following circumstances:

- Sudden death of persons who are not under care of a physician in the thirty-six hours preceding death
- Where the circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means
- Where death occurs under suspicious circumstances
- Where a coroner's autopsy or postmortem or coroner's inquest is to be held
- Where death results from unknown or obscure causes
- Where death occurs within one year following an accident
- Where the death is caused by any violence whatsoever
- Where death results from a known or suspected abortion
- Where death apparently results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation, or smothering
- Where death is due to premature birth or still birth
- Where death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease
- Where death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge, or sodomy
- Where death occurs in a jail or prison
- Where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends

# Staffing

In 2023 the coroner's office was staffed with 3 full-time employees (coroner, chief deputy coroner, and office assistant). The biggest challenge is ensuring coverage for death investigations which occur 24/7. Equally challenging is providing adequate relief for employee leaves due to the nature of the work. To ensure coverage and relief the office employs six on-call investigators (deputy coroners).

The coroner, chief deputy coroner, and deputy coroners are state certified and often also nationally certified medicolegal death investigators. Certification is required by statute and employees recertify every five years. Certification means medicolegal investigators have proven knowledge and skills necessary to perform medicolegal death investigations as set forth in the National Institute of Justice publication *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*.

Forensic Pathologists are licensed physicians who have specialized training and board certification in the field of Forensic Pathology. Forensic Pathology is the scientific investigation of sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths. The Kittitas County Coroner's Office relies upon Locums, or Forensic Pathologists who travel into the area to perform autopsies for the county.

**Join us<sup>3</sup>!** There are benefits to working as a forensic pathologist in Washington State. Those include:

- Student loan payments reimbursed by the state
- No state income tax
- Free medicolegal training opportunities
- Qualified and certified colleagues across the state (certification required for coroners, MEs and MDIs)
- Local experienced neuropathology, anthropology, and odontology consult services.

Office staff are responsible for accounting, scheduling investigators, and providing clerical support to investigators. The office maintains the records and files and provides customer service to the public during normal business hours. **The coroner's office is located at 507 N. Nanum St. in Ellensburg.**

Kittitas County Coroner always has someone available to answer your call. When the office is closed our **phone (509) 933-8200** is answered 24/7/365! The office email address [coroner@co.kittitas.wa.us](mailto:coroner@co.kittitas.wa.us) is checked but it not as closely monitored as telephones. There is always an investigator available willing to help answer questions.

## Definitions

**Cause of Death** is a term used to indicate the specific disease or injury causing death. **The leading causes of death in the US in 2023 are<sup>4</sup>:**

1. Heart disease: 695,547
2. Cancer: 605,213
3. COVID-19: 416,893
4. Accidents (unintentional injuries): 224,935
5. Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 162,890
6. Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 142,342
7. Alzheimer's disease: 119,399
8. Diabetes: 103,294

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<sup>3</sup> Become a Forensic Pathologist in Washington video: <https://vimeo.com/985852460>

<sup>4</sup> WebMD 2023 Top 10: <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/news/20231006/these-are-the-top-10-causes-of-death-in-the-us>

**Manner of Death** is a legal determination made by a coroner classifying a death into one of five categories: natural, suicide, accident, homicide, and undetermined.

**Scene Investigations** where the medicolegal death investigator will go to the location of death to conduct a site evaluation, conduct interviews, and document, preserve, and collect evidence.

**Autopsy** is a physical examination of a body after death. The examination involves observing the external and internal structures of the body to gain information about the person and their death. The goal of a forensic autopsy is to provide independent confirmation of what is known or suspected and to document the findings. Autopsies are not performed in all cases.

**Toxicology** the measurement or analysis of potential toxins, including naturally occurring or chemicals found in the environment, alcohol, or drugs (prescription and illicit).

## Manner of Death

In 2023 there were 292 deaths reported in Kittitas County to the Coroner's Office. Most deaths were reported by medical or law enforcement personnel. Based on analysis of circumstances of the death the coroner assumed jurisdiction in 178 of the reported deaths.

| Year | Natural | Accident | Suicide | Homicide | Undetermined |
|------|---------|----------|---------|----------|--------------|
| 2023 | 237     | 36       | 8       | 1        | 4            |
| 2022 | 232     | 27       | 3       | 1        | 2            |
| 2021 | 222     | 26       | 8       | 1        | 38           |
| 2020 | 207     | 24       | 6       | 4        | 1            |
| 2019 | 215     | 14       | 9       | 2        | 4            |

## General Statistics

| Type of Case   | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| <b>Reported Deaths</b>   | 26  | 20  | 23  | 19  | 27  | 28  | 33  | 20  | 26  | 24  | 21  | 25  | 292   |
| <b>Jurisdiction*</b>   | 14  | 10  | 19  | 13  | 18  | 18  | 22  | 11  | 14  | 13  | 9   | 17  | 178   |
| <b>Non-Jurisdiction</b>  | 12  | 10  | 4   | 6   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 9   | 12  | 11  | 12  | 8   | 114   |
| <b>Scene Response</b>  | 11  | 8   | 8   | 7   | 8   | 10  | 14  | 9   | 11  | 10  | 4   | 13  | 133   |
| <b>Death Notifications</b>   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 3   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 5   | 17    |
| *Transport to a local funeral home acting as Morgue occurs for all jurisdictional cases. Total 178 transports in 2023. |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |       |

| Exam Type       | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Full Autopsy    | 4   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 6   | 4   | 5   | 2   | 5   | 0   | 1   | 39    |
| Partial Autopsy | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| External Only   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 3   | 7     |
| Toxicology Only | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 2   | 3     |
| None            | 22  | 17  | 20  | 16  | 22  | 22  | 29  | 15  | 22  | 18  | 20  | 19  | 242   |

| Manner of Death | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Natural         | 23  | 15  | 20  | 15  | 22  | 22  | 26  | 14  | 19  | 22  | 18  | 21  | 237   |
| Suicide         | 1   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 8     |
| Homicide        | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1     |
| Accident        | 1   | 4   | 3   | 1   | 5   | 3   | 6   | 6   | 4   | 0   | 1   | 2   | 36    |
| Undetermined    | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 3   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 10    |
| Pending         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |

| Natural Deaths   | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Neurologic       | 7   | 4   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 8   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 51    |
| Genitourinary    | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 5     |
| Cardiac          | 2   | 4   | 10  | 8   | 9   | 2   | 10  | 2   | 3   | 10  | 4   | 6   | 70    |
| Kidney           | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 3   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 8     |
| Pulmonary        | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 3   | 6   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 27    |
| Liver            | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 7     |
| Gastrointestinal | 2   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 3   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 8     |
| Cancer           | 8   | 5   | 5   | 1   | 2   | 6   | 2   | 4   | 9   | 1   | 5   | 3   | 51    |
| Other Natural    | 2   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 10    |

| Suicide         | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Firearm         | 1   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 1   | 7     |
| Hanging         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| Drug Overdose   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| Jump/Fall       | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| Carbon Monoxide | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 1     |

| Homicide      | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Motor Vehicle | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1     |
| In Custody    | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |

| Accident      | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Drugs         | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 14    |
| Falls         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 2     |
| Motor Vehicle | 0   | 1   | 2   | 0   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 15    |
| Drowning      | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 3     |
| Fire/Burns    | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2     |

| Undetermined      | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Drugs             | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| Blunt Force       | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| Asphyxia          | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| No Anatomic Cause | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| Non-Human         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 0   | 6     |

| Age of Deceased | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| < 1             | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 4     |
| 1 to 5          | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| 6 to 10         | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| 11 to 17        | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| 18 to 25        | 1   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 4   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 8     |
| 26 to 44        | 1   | 3   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 0   | 5   | 2   | 1   | 0   | 4   | 22    |
| 45 to 64        | 5   | 2   | 5   | 6   | 1   | 4   | 7   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 0   | 6   | 44    |
| 65 +            | 19  | 14  | 14  | 12  | 20  | 21  | 22  | 13  | 17  | 19  | 20  | 14  | 205   |

| Disposition        | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|--------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Burial             | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 6   | 0   | 3   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 34    |
| Cremation (JA)     | 24  | 16  | 18  | 18  | 22  | 24  | 26  | 19  | 19  | 17  | 14  | 21  | 238   |
| Cremation (NJA)    | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 2     |
| Storage            | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1     |
| Unclaimed          | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| Donation           | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 0   | 2     |
| Entombment         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |
| Removal From State | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 6     |
| Exhumation         | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0     |



| Organ Donation    | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Case Sent to OPO  | 7   | 3   | 3   | 5   | 5   | 7   | 5   | 7   | 7   | 6   | 6   | 8   | 69    |
| OPO Review Case   | 7   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 5   | 7   | 4   | 6   | 7   | 6   | 6   | 8   | 65    |
| Donation Occurred | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 11    |

| Sex    | Total |
|--------|-------|
| Male   | 156   |
| Female | 129   |

| Ethnicity               | Total |
|-------------------------|-------|
| American Indian/Alaskan | 7     |
| Asian                   | 3     |
| Black                   | 3     |
| Pacific Islander        | 0     |
| White                   | 266   |
| Other                   | 7     |

## Tissue and Organ Donation

The Kittitas County Coroner's Office recognizes donated tissue such as skin, bone, and heart valves can dramatically improve the quality of life for recipients. Donation can help save lives and end needless suffering<sup>5</sup>. Deaths we investigate are automatically and purposefully referred to organ procurement organizations through the MDILog.com database. Once an investigator enters their report a conversation between the investigator and an organ procurement organization starts.

Donations can be used in many applications including serious life-threatening medical situations. Signing up for organ donation means someday you may be able to help another in need. Today the number of people in need of the donation vastly outnumbers that of registered organ donors.

Under the authority of RCW Chapter 68.64, the coroner's office works in cooperation with organ and tissues procurement agencies.

| Organ Donation    | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Total |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Case Sent to OPO  | 7   | 3   | 3   | 5   | 5   | 7   | 5   | 7   | 7   | 6   | 6   | 8   | 69    |
| OPO Reviewed Case | 7   | 3   | 2   | 4   | 5   | 7   | 4   | 6   | 7   | 6   | 6   | 8   | 65    |
| Donation Occurred | 0   | 0   | 0   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 2   | 11    |

<sup>5</sup> Donate Life America Stories of Hope: <https://donatelife.net/stories-of-hope/chris-and-caitlyn-tissue-donor-and-recipient/>

## Indigent and Unclaimed Deceased

As caretaker of those who die in Kittitas County the coroner makes every attempt to locate and contact next of kin. There are some whose family cannot afford their loved one's disposition. These cases are defined as "Indigent" and disposition is completed with care and in accordance with RCW 68.50.230 by the coroner's office. In these situations, the family is aware of their loved one's final resting place.

Others remain "Unclaimed". This may happen when the family simply wants nothing at all to do with the decedent or after an exhaustive search we cannot find any family. Sadly, the number of unclaimed decedents continues to grow.

In January 2015 the coroner inherited indigent and unclaimed cases previously investigated by the prosecutor acting as coroner. In 2022 coroner's resources were dedicated to reviewing death records dating back to 1935 in the hopes of reuniting any person who was unclaimed with their family.

By the end of 2022 there were 41 unclaimed persons entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NAMUS). NAMUS automatically cross checks missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person entries. No matches have been made by NAMUS yet. However, in November 2022 genetic genealogist Elizabeth Stone, a volunteer with Unclaimedpersons.org, offered contact information for next-of-kin for Kittitas County cases she saw in NAMUS. In 2023 using Elizabeth's research, the coroner's office continued attempts to contact family members. The goal is to help the remaining unclaimed find their family.

"My whole-hearted thanks to Elizabeth for volunteering her time and expertise".

Today any eligible veteran or veteran's spouse left unclaimed will be moved to Tahoma National Cemetery when the family cannot be located. Established November 11, 1993, Tahoma has a Memorial walkway containing 36 memorials commemorating soldiers of all 20th century wars. There they will be cared for and honored for their service. Coroner Henderson will continue his vigil for the others.

## Help Us Identify

Kittitas County Coroner's office has one unidentified person. John Doe was found in a remote area of Kittitas County in 1987 and remains to this day unidentified.

November 2022, using imaging obtained with assistance from the Washington State Forensic Anthropologist and the King County Medical Examiner's Office the National Missing and Exploited Children organization provided a facial reconstruction poster.

**Please take a moment to look at the following picture. If you recognize this young man or know someone who might, contact our office (509) 933-8200.**

