

NATRONA COUNTY

CORONER'S OFFICE

2020

Annual Report

Coroner James L. Whipps D-ABMDI



Accredited by

**The International Association of
Coroners & Medical Examiners**

Coroner
James L. Whipps D-ABMDI

Chief Deputy Coroner
Darin Kiester

Lead Investigator
Taylor Jessee

Deputy Coroners
Richard Mackler
Russ Dalgarn
Kimberly Soller
Rebecca Schuler
Jonathon Munday
Nicolette Hanson
Lindsay Mauth
Mari Manthei-Robinson
Connie Jacobson

NATRONA COUNTY

Wyoming



OFFICE OF THE CORONER

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To the Citizens of Natrona County,

I am pleased to share the 2020 Annual Report for the Natrona County Coroner's Office. The goal of providing this information to the public is to increase awareness and understanding of the role of the Coroner's Office and to focus attention on the causes and manners of death in our county in an effort to reduce the numbers of preventable deaths to the highest extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report has been compiled from records generated by the Natrona County Coroner's Office and is derived from autopsy summary reports, toxicology reports, death summary reports, investigation reports, case dockets/verdict. Hopefully you will find this up-to-date and complete information to be in a format this is accurate and easy to read.

It is also my hope that this information will be valuable to you. If you have any questions or need further information or clarification, please feel free to contact the Natrona County Coroner's Office.

Respectfully,

James L. Whipps D-ABMDI
Coroner
Natrona County, Wyoming

MISSION STATEMENT & GOAL

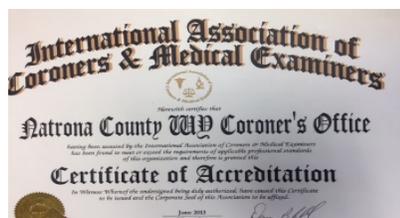
To conduct medicolegal death investigations in an independent, compassionate and professional manner while serving as a representative of the decedents and survivors and to facilitate a thorough understanding of the circumstances surrounding a death by providing law enforcement agencies, families and the public with as much information as possible.

DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE NATRONA COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

The Coroner, James L. Whipps, is an elected official who oversees a separate and independent government agency which serves the residents of Natrona County by conducting parallel investigations of any sudden and unexpected death, or those deaths that occur under violent or suspicious circumstances. While the Coroner is elected, the Coroner's Office operates as an entity of Natrona County Government and is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Natrona County. An annual budget is proposed and submitted to the Natrona County Commission for approval. The approved budget for the specified fiscal year is then managed by the Coroner who is the administrator of that office.

James formal education is from Casper College with a degree in Criminal Justice, with several other fields of study with the US. Military. James has been affiliated with the Natrona County Coroner's Office since 1999 as a Death Scene Investigator and Lead Investigator and completed study and certification as a diplomat with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. James was appointed the Natrona County Coroner in September of 2019 and then elected to office in November of 2020. James has an extensive background in government, business administration and investigations. James is married with four children and three grandchildren and is a lifelong Natrona County resident.

The Natrona County Coroner's Office is the first office to be accredited with the International Association of Coroners & Medical Examiners in Wyoming. Accreditation demonstrates compliance with industry and professional standards and performance criteria and provides an independent measure of assurance to the tax-paying citizens of Natrona County. Accreditation is becoming the standard in the Medico-legal field and is even legislated in some states.



Wyoming laws mandate that the Coroner investigate any death that is sudden and unexpected, suspicious, violent in nature or a death resulting from an accident, suicide, homicide, drug overdose or is undetermined. The Coroner is also responsible for positively identifying decedents and locating and making notification to next of kin.

The Coroner's Office seeks to find answers to the questions which are important to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement agencies, insurance companies, the judicial system, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Wyoming Department of Health, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to name just a few. The pursuit of civil or criminal proceedings is in part determined by the ability of the Coroner's Office to scientifically determine the manner and cause of death. This unique makeup of job responsibilities means the Coroner's Office performs both a public service and a civic role that requires the Coroner to scrutinize every death within his jurisdiction to determine the events that led up to the death.

Investigative services and processes performed by the Natrona County Coroner might include: medicolegal death investigations, child and infant death investigation and reconstruction, authorization of cremations and burials, securing burial transit permits, scene photo-documentation, inked fingerprint collection, biological and trace evidence collection, and certifying death certificates. Forensic autopsies and services of a forensic odontologist, forensic anthropologist and forensic entomologist are also ordered by the Coroner. Death scene investigations include but are not limited to: homicides, suicides, wrongful deaths, industrial and residential accidents, motor vehicle deaths, deaths due to abuse/neglect/negligence, terrorist acts, death due to malpractice, mass fatalities, arson and fire deaths. Investigations and rulings of the Coroner's Office concerning criminal acts or those that affect the public health and safety of citizens of Natrona County are the foundation for follow up actions by other investigative agencies.

The Coroner and his deputies make every effort to positively identify the deceased, locate and notify the legal next of kin in a timely manner and in person if possible. The Coroner's Office also facilitates the release of the remains to the funeral home selected by the family and also facilitates county responsibilities of resources for cremation or burial for unclaimed or indigent decedents per Wyoming statutes.

The Coroner's Office is responsible for reviewing medical records related to both the present event and all past medical records if they might have some relationship to the death. This office documents all the information gathered through the investigation in a written report and collects all documents related to the investigation in a case file. Upon request, the Coroner's Office provides copies of their investigative case file to the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office and invested law enforcement agencies per their requests.

SIZE AND POPULATION OF NATRONA COUNTY

The geographic area served by the Natrona County Coroner's Office includes all of Natrona County which is 5,340 square miles and is located within the central region of Wyoming along Interstate-25. With a population of 79,858, Natrona County is the second largest populated county in Wyoming. Because Wyoming is the number one producer of coal in the United States, the energy industry is the top revenue creator for the state. Oil and gas fields are found in almost every county in the state. Tourism and ranching are other major industries in Wyoming. Natrona County is the home to a major regional medical facility as well as an acute rehabilitation hospital, and one other smaller private specialty hospital.

CAUSE & MANNER OF DEATH

What is the difference between Cause and Manner of Death...?

The cause of **death** is the specific injury or disease that leads to **death**. The **manner of death** is the determination of how the injury or disease leads to **death**. There are five **manners of death** (natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined).

NATURAL: Death caused by disease process.

SUICIDE: Death as a result of a purposeful action to end one's own life.

ACCIDENT: Death other than natural where there is no evidence of intent.

HOMICIDE: Death resulting from injuries intentionally inflicted by another person.

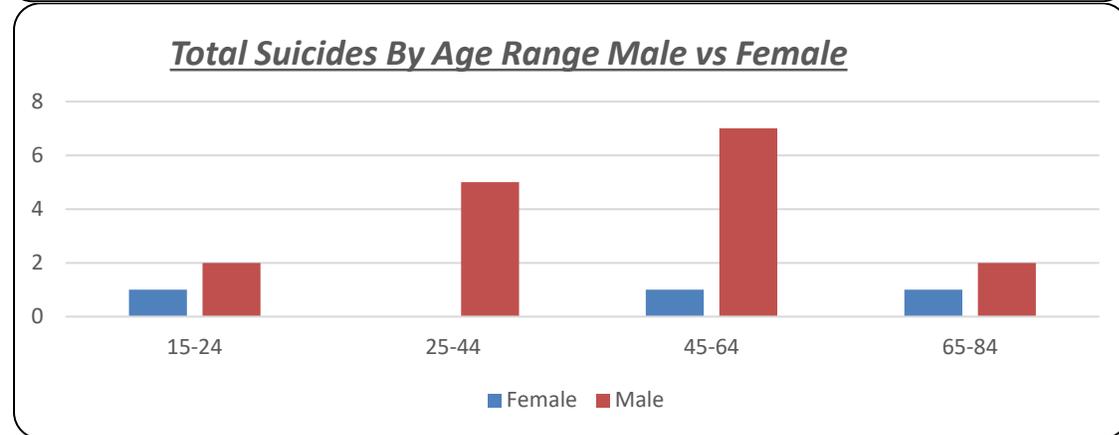
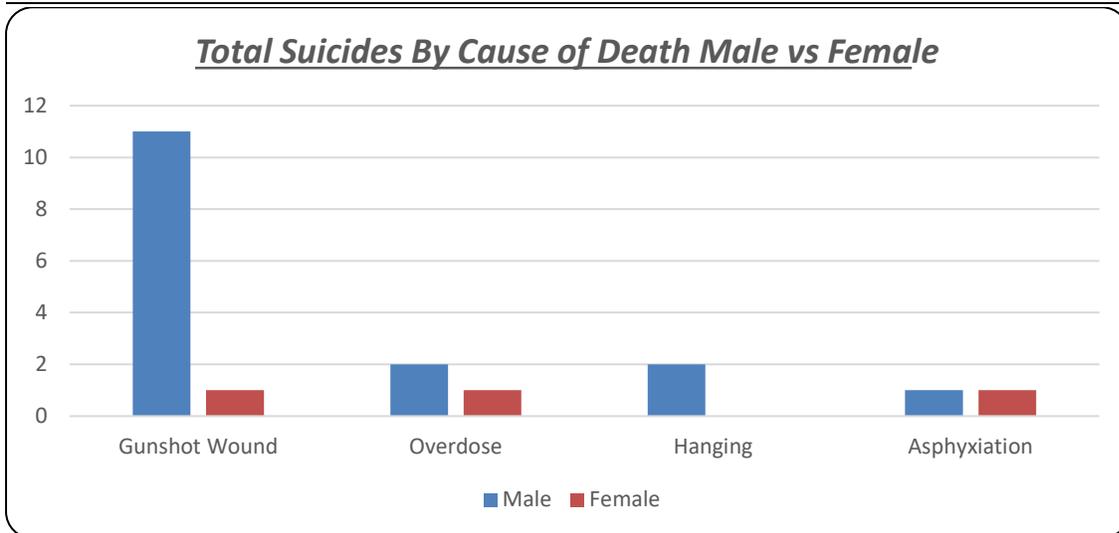
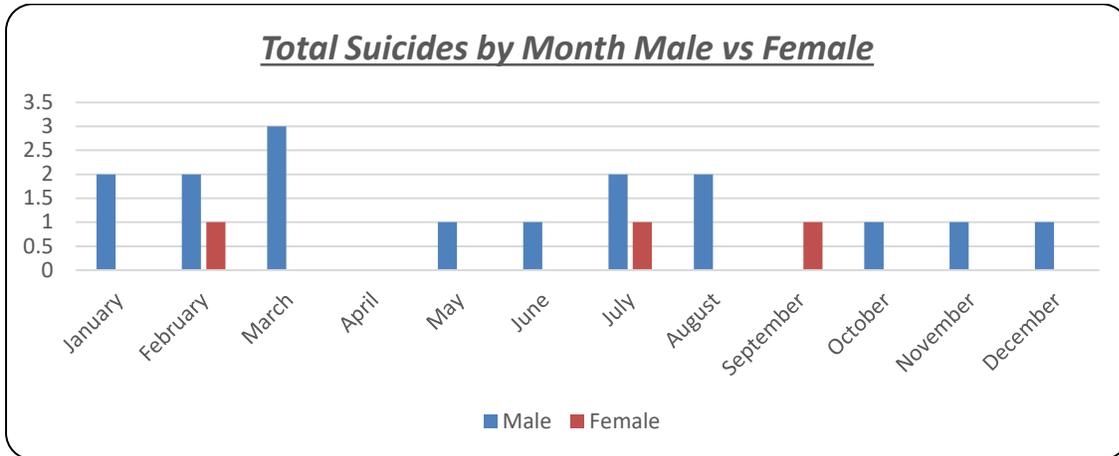
UNDETERMINED: Manner assigned when there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.

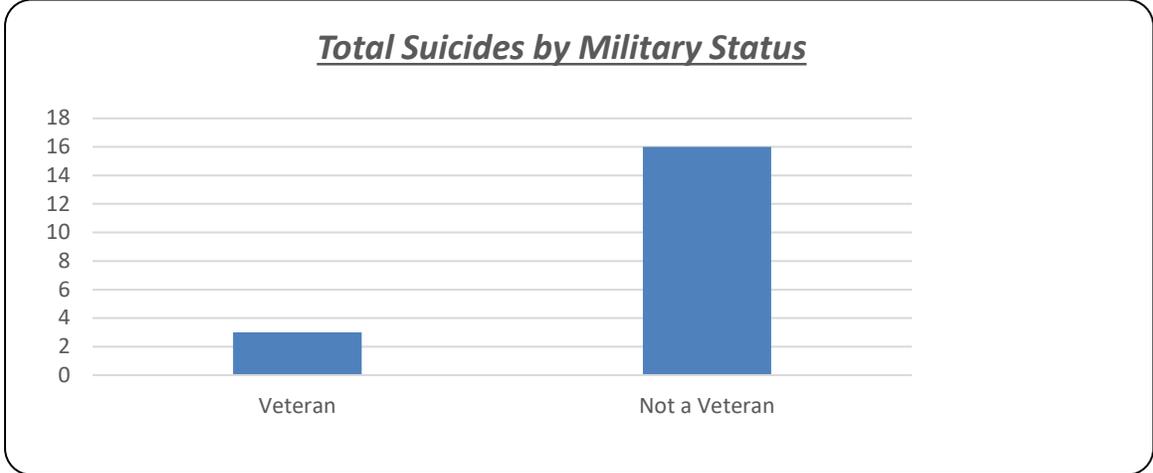
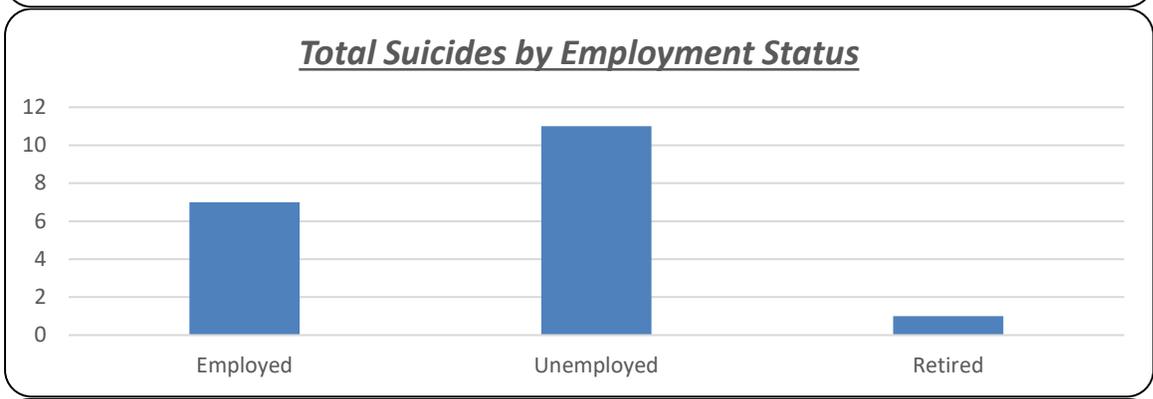
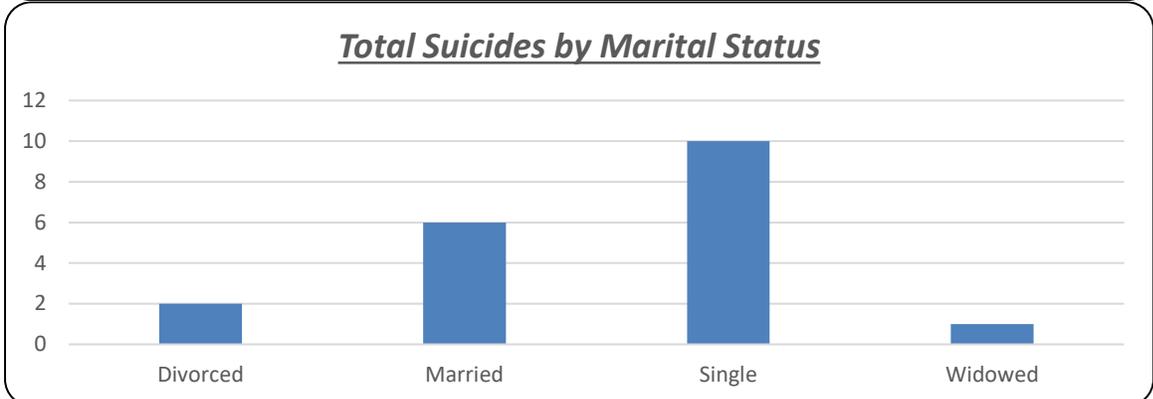
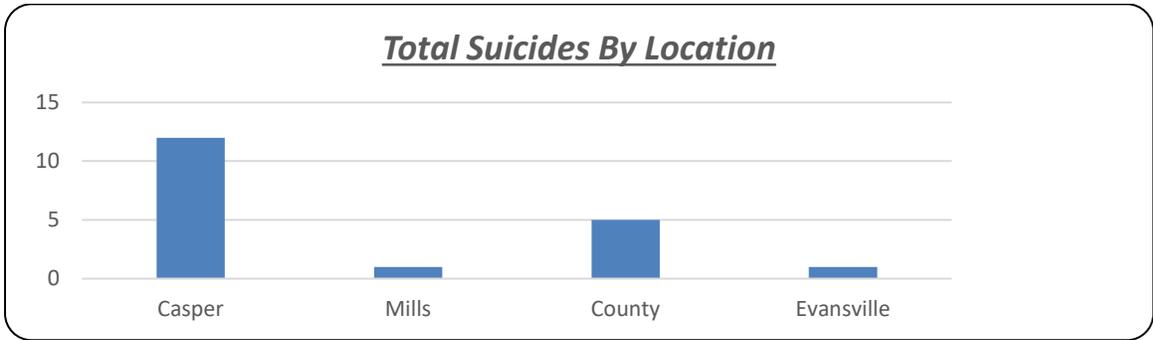
STATISTICS

Natrona County had **1087** deaths in 2020 with **252** of those investigated by The Natrona County Coroner's Office. Of the total deaths under the jurisdiction of the Coroner, **174** were classified as Natural deaths, with **48** Accidental deaths, **19** deaths by Suicide, **10** Homicides and **1** Undetermined manner of death.

SUCIDES

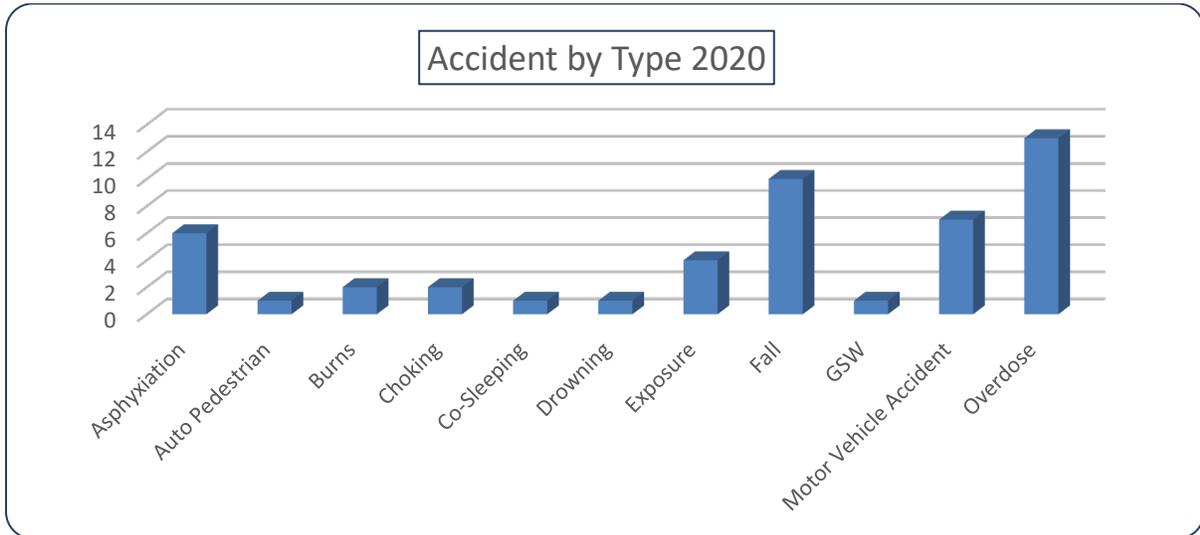
Suicide is death caused by intentional, self-inflicted injuries. In Natrona County during 2020 there were **19** deaths by suicide compared to **28** in 2019.





ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

Accidental deaths are those deaths that are other than natural where there is no evidence of intent; i.e. an unintentional event or chain of events. This Category includes most motor vehicle accidents, falls, drowning, accidental drug overdoses, fire related deaths, etc. During 2020, **48** deaths were certified as “accidental”.

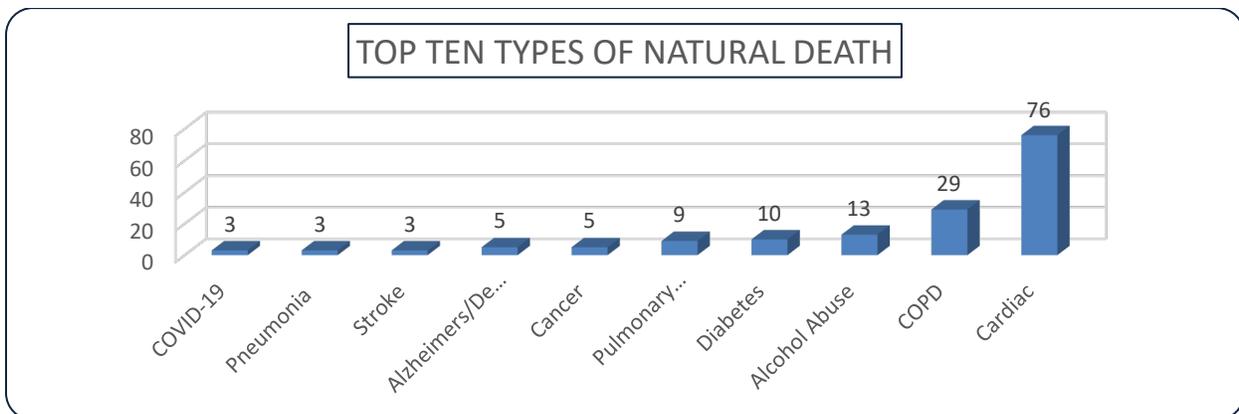


HOMICIDE

Homicide is death resulting from injuries intentionally inflicted by another person. There were **10** homicides in 2020. This is the most homicides ever recorded in one year in Natrona County.

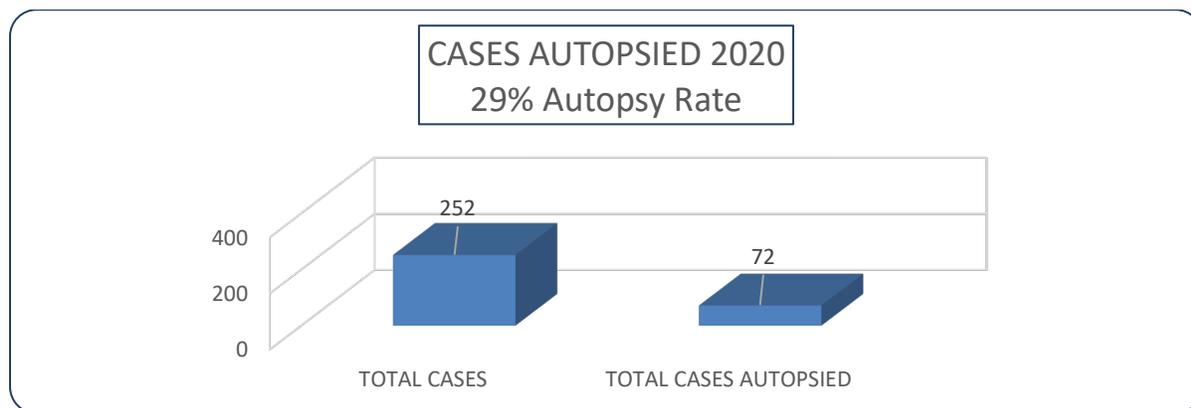
NATURAL

There were **174** Natural deaths in 2020, the top six are listed. There was **1** Undetermined death in 2020 due to SIDS. SIDS will always be classified as Undetermined.



AUTOPSY CASES

The Natrona County Coroner's office ordered 72 forensic autopsies in 2020. An autopsy is just one of the many tools the coroner depends on to help him determine the manner and/or cause of death. By statute No *hospital* or non-forensic autopsies can be conducted for people who have fallen under the coroner's jurisdiction. Not all deaths are autopsied, if the investigation provides a conclusive cause and manner of death an autopsy need not be performed. Required autopsies by state statute are those who are babies or children, all homicides, prisoner, trustee, inmate or patient of any county or state corrections facility or state hospital, and suspicious deaths.



INVESTIGATIONS

Total Investigations completed by the Coroner's Office in 2020 totaled 252 full investigation cases. These cases included 13 backward cases which are reported to our office "*after the fact*". 239 decedents were transported to the Morgue and then released.

An additional 18 Partial investigations were completed. These include cases where our office assists other County Coroner's, or where we are specifically investigating identity or location and notification of next of kin.

TOXICOLOGY

Lab specimens are drawn on every case brought into the Coroner's Office. It is not necessary to order toxicology on all cases, only where doing so will help in the final determination of manner and cause of death. With those cases, a specimen is collected but saved for one year and then destroyed if not used.

ORGAN DONATION

The Natrona County Coroner's Office works diligently with Donor Alliance, and the Rocky Mountain Eye Bank to ensure that each decedent and their family's wishes if at all possible are respected. In 2020 31 gifts of life were given through both organizations.

COVID-19

The pandemic brought many additional challenges to the Coroner's office and the world. Unlike other pandemics the COVID-19 virus poses a minimal risk after death. Because of this, deaths due to the virus that occur in care facilities are considered natural attended deaths and are not within the Coroner's jurisdiction. The Natrona County Coroner's Office investigated 6 deaths in 2020 related to the COVID virus where deaths occurred outside care facilities.