



COLUMBIA COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE



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MEDIA RELEASE

Contact: Jeremy Reese-Columbia County Coroner

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For Immediate Release

Re: Columbia County COVID Fatality Update

Columbia County Coroner Jeremy Reese is releasing the following information regarding the deaths associated with COVID 19 reported within Columbia County to the Coroner's Office.

As of this afternoon 3 deaths related to the COVID 19 Pandemic have been referred to the Columbia County Coroner's Office for review. A summary of the 3 cases is as follows:

The first death reported to my office on Saturday, April 4th was that of a 56 year old Male resident of the Berwick Retirement Village who died on Saturday April 4th at the Berwick Hospital and tested positive for COVID 19 and died from Complications associated with COVID 19.

The second death was that of an 87 year old male, who was also a Berwick Retirement Village Resident, and died on the morning of Sunday April 5th in the Berwick Hospital. While the decedent was found to have symptoms consistent with COVID 19 and was classified as a person under investigation for COVID 19 or PUI, the decedent's lab test results were negative for COVID 19 and this death is not classified as a COVID related fatality.

The third death was referred to my office in the early morning hours of Tuesday April 7th. The deceased is a 77 year old male resident of Berwick Retirement Village 1 who died at the Berwick Retirement Village 1 facility due to complications of COVID 19 and this decedent had tested positive for COVID 19.

Berwick Retirement Village 1 and Berwick Retirement Village 2 are both Skilled Nursing Facilities adjacent to the Berwick Hospital Center physically connected with separate addresses. For the purposes of death investigation, the Berwick Hospital Center and Berwick Retirement Village 1 fall under the jurisdiction of the Columbia County Coroner's Office. Any deaths that occur at the Berwick Retirement Village 2 location are investigated or reviewed by the Luzerne County Coroner. COVID 19 deaths occurring in the inpatient hospital setting or while under the care of a physician or in a nursing home are pronounced deceased by the Physician or RN at the facility and the Cause of death is certified by a Physician at the facility. Under the County Code these deaths are still referred to the County Coroner for review in cases of pandemics of highly contagious disease such as COVID 19.

Coroner Reese also reports that in addition to reviewing the above deaths, he has Mass Fatality plans in place should a surge of deaths related to COVID 19 occur across Columbia County. Reese adds, "I am coordinating and

working with Columbia County EMA, Montour County Coroner Scott Lynn, all of the county Funeral Directors, and the PA State Coroner's Association regarding Mass Fatality Planning should an unfortunate surge of deaths occur in our County as a result of this new and unpredictable pandemic."

*****Updated Information on April 12, 2020*****

Coroner Jeremy Reese is releasing the following additional information regarding Columbia County COVID deaths on April 12, 2020.

In addition to the deaths previously reported a 91 year old male died on April 8, 2020 at the Berwick Retirement Village 1. The male tested positive for COVID 19 and died from complications of the COVID virus. Another death, that of an 80 year old male who died in the ER of the Berwick Hospital also on April 8th, and was a resident of Berwick Retirement Village 1 is being reviewed for a COVID related death but laboratory testing results to confirm if the decedent was COVID positive or not have not been returned. This person was not suspected to be COVID positive according to the Physician, but given his proximity to the other COVID patients at Berwick Retirement Village, testing was performed.

On Saturday April 11, Montour County Coroner Scott Lynn informed me that another Berwick Retirement Village resident had died in Montour County and was COVID positive. The additional deaths will bring the total number of deaths of Columbia County residents to 4 with an additional death still under review.

It should be noted that there will be differences in the number of deaths reported to Coroner's offices and the number of deaths reported during daily Department of Health updates due to the death reporting process to the Department of Health, who are now requiring physicians at the hospitals to submit electronic death certificates to report COVID deaths. As this process is new for some of the Physicians, there are delays noted in the death certificates being filed as the Physician's try to work through the new system. I am working closely with the Physicians at Berwick Hospital Center and Retirement Village to assist them through this process as I have been utilizing the Electronic Death reporting system for several years.

The Pennsylvania State Coroner's Association is engaged in ongoing discussion with the Department of Health regarding the reporting, classification, and documentation of COVID related deaths across the Commonwealth. I do appreciate the Berwick Hospital and Berwick Retirement Village's reporting these deaths to my office in a timely manner and I have made my office available to assist them in whatever means I can as they deal with this very emotional and challenging situation. As noted in the earlier press release, deaths involving highly contagious disease or pandemic are to be reported to the Coroner under the law of the County Code.

Additional questions on the Montour County death can be referred to Montour County Coroner Scott Lynn.