



COLUMBIA COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE



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MEDIA RELEASE

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Date: April 19, 2020

For Immediate Release

Re: Columbia County COVID Fatality Update

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

Today the Pennsylvania Department of Health reported 6 COVID Deaths in Columbia County. Previously Montour County Coroner Scott Lynn and I reported the deaths of 5 Columbia County residents all from the Berwick Retirement Village 1.

Yesterday, Saturday April, 18th, I was notified by the Luzerne County Coroner's office of the deaths of 2 other Columbia County residents at the Wilkes Barre General Hospital in Luzerne County. One of those decedents is an elderly female resident of the Berwick Retirement Village 1, and the second is a 56 year old Male resident of Berwick Borough. The Luzerne County Coroner's office has also informed me that they are investigating the deaths of 2 residents at Berwick Retirement Village 2 which falls under the jurisdiction of their office. Additional details regarding those deaths will need to be released by the Luzerne County Coroner's Office.

As noted, there are delays in reporting of deaths from the COVID pandemic from the local level to the State Department of Health reports. These delays are due in part to various parties reporting the death, Physicians who have now been required to report deaths on the Electronic Death Reporting Software have not used the software previously which has led to some delays, along with data validation by the PA Department of Health. The total number of COVID positive deaths of Columbia County residents known by me to date is now 7.

As this epidemic continues to evolve I along with many if not all Coroners across the Commonwealth are struggling to align deaths reported to our offices against deaths reports by the Department of Health. Despite the State Coroner statute stating that deaths of highly infectious disease need to be reported to the Coroner, the Department of Health has not required Physicians and Skilled Nursing Facilities report these deaths to the Coroner thus a potential for deaths to be reported to the Department of Health and not to the Coroner is certainly possible. The PA State Coroner's Association has made attempts to resolve this issue with the PA Department of Health with no success

Fortunately to date most facilities or funeral directors in Columbia County have been reporting COVID related deaths to the Coroner. Also it is fortunate that a strong working relationship between Coroner Offices have allowed my office to share and receive information with both Luzerne County Coroner Frank Hacken and Montour County Coroner Scott Lynn. As Coroner's we are not only the first asked about the death impact of COVID as the State reports this information, but we also have resources available to assist the facilities where deaths occur to ensure proper care of the decedent and proper reporting occurs along with Mass Fatality planning. In addition it is my belief that as part of my elected oath of office, that I have a duty to keep our communities informed of this unique threat to public health.