



California Department of Public Health

Process Improvements Could Help Reduce Delays in Completing Fetal Death Registrations

Background

According to California state law, when a fetus dies after having reached 20 weeks of uterogestation, the fetal death generally must be registered with the local registrar of births and deaths (local registrar) within eight calendar days of the delivery. A mother or family experiencing a fetal death must navigate this registration process before obtaining a disposition permit, which allows burial or cremation. State law assigns responsibility for completing specific steps in the registration process to various parties, including funeral homes, physicians, local registrars, and, in some cases, coroners. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has supervisory authority over local registrars, and it is also responsible for administering the electronic registration system that parties use to complete fetal death registrations.

Key Findings

- » From 2017 through 2022, the average processing time for registering fetal deaths was three times longer than the eight-day time frame allowed by state law.
 - The greatest delays in the fetal death registration process occurred during those steps that hospitals and funeral homes generally complete, which include starting the registration process and obtaining signatures required by state law.
- » Key improvements in the fetal death registration process could mitigate primary causes of delays.
 - Our review found that certain steps in the registration process proceed more quickly when hospitals play a lead role in completing them, because hospitals are likely better equipped to determine that fetal deaths have occurred and gather the information necessary to complete registration.
 - Some registrations we reviewed may have experienced delays because responsible parties were not aware that the registration was pending their action, a shortcoming that CDPH could mitigate by updating its electronic system for registering fetal deaths to send notifications to users when their next action is required.
- » Coordinating more closely with parties involved in the registration process—and state entities responsible for overseeing funeral homes and physicians—will allow CDPH to better understand and respond to potential causes of delays in the fetal death registration process.

Key Recommendations

- » To improve the average time it takes for fetal death registration statewide, the Legislature should amend state law to require hospitals, or any medical facilities where fetal deaths may occur, to initiate the creation of the fetal death certificate for any fetal deaths that occur at their facilities.
- » The Legislature should also require CDPH to regularly notify relevant licensing or oversight entities of instances in which physicians and funeral establishments repeatedly fail to comply with fetal death registration requirements and to provide information necessary for investigation.
- » CDPH should submit a request to its registration system vendor to develop and implement in the system an electronic notification mechanism that will alert the appropriate user outside the system, such as by email, that a certificate is awaiting that user's action.
- » CDPH should begin to hold meetings regularly with local registrars to identify and resolve issues related to fetal death registration, and such meetings should include representatives for other parties involved in the registration process and representatives from relevant licensing entities.