

Fresno County employees may have stolen from estates of the dead

By Marc Benjamin
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Three members of one of Fresno County's smallest departments have been placed on administrative leave following a weeks-long internal affairs investigation into alleged thefts from dead people's estates, District Attorney Lisa A. Smittcamp announced Thursday.

The three employees of the Public Administrator's Office were placed on leave last week. Two of them resigned Tuesday and Wednesday and the third remains on leave, Smittcamp said. The district attorney held a news conference in downtown Fresno to announce her office's findings.

"There is a pending criminal investigation," she said. "We believe this behavior has been going on for several years, possibly three to five years."

The [Public Administrator's website](#) spells out the concerns: "Information has been discovered that suggests assets belonging to estates handled by the Fresno County Public Administrator's Office may have been stolen."

The Public Administrator's Office was placed under the District Attorney in January after the dissolution of the Fresno County Coroner-Public Administrator following Coroner David Hadden's retirement. The Coroner's Office is now a division of the Fresno County Sheriff's Office.

The Public Administrator's Office handles estates of people who die with nobody to oversee their estates. The discovery is a significant blow to the Public Administrator's Office, which has just four positions. Three people work on estates. A fourth employee is an accountant. Smittcamp said the office accountant does not appear to be involved.

Smittcamp said her office will talk to officials in other counties where there have been similar problems to seek ways of repairing the Public Administrator division's reputation.

In a news conference Thursday afternoon, Smittcamp declined to say the number of estates affected or the amount of money potentially involved.

"It is the most disturbing thing that has happened to me since I was sworn-in (in January)," Smittcamp said. "It is absolutely unacceptable to me as a citizen, as an elected official and as the district attorney of this county. I am disgusted by this behavior and I will not tolerate it and I will not allow it to continue."

County Administrative Officer John Navarrette said it's "a personnel matter and we really can't speak a lot about it" or release names.

To cover duties of the Public Administrator's office, he said, the county is bringing in extra help and considering using retirees "until this thing gets dealt with one way or another."

Fresno County Supervisor Andreas Borgeas, the only supervisor at the news conference, said the county may need to install more checks and balances over the public administrator.

He said the county must look to experts in the field and see how Fresno County compares in best practices.

"This is a public integrity problem," Borgeas said. "I know that supervisors in 2013 and 2014 began to question the management and oversight of that office while it was under the jurisdiction of the coroner."

Even though the office had been under the coroner for the 35 years until January, the Public Administrator's Office is housed separately, about a mile from the coroner's office near Malaga.

The district attorney's announcement was upsetting for former coroner Hadden.

"We (the public administrator) would work directly with the judicial system and they have to have explicit faith in what they do," Hadden said.

Hadden said the office would place two people on each case to double check the activity of one another.

"They don't count money or inventory jewelry without a second person being there, but if they collude," he said, trailing off.

He said he learned of the situation through "unofficial channels" earlier this week and is "heartsick about it. I know those people; I liked those people."

Public Administrator employees deal with millions of dollars in assets. Their wages, Hadden said, are comparatively low and staffing — at one time a staff of six was in the office — is inadequate.

Because of the department's duties, he said, it's viewed as a possible nest of criminal activity, he said.

"I don't know enough about it to know what we should have done to pick this up," Hadden said.

Often, he said, the coroner's office relied on what it charged for estate work by the public administrator to bolster the department's budget. That amount was usually in the low six figures, he said.

When he retired, Hadden recalls being thanked by one of the public administrator employees under investigation for allowing him the opportunity to reach his potential.

"That sounds kind of weird now," Hadden said.

He said there was a theft of an expensive ring where police visited his office in late 2013 or 2014, but that nothing came of the investigation before his departure in January.

"That investigation should be reopened based upon current circumstances," Hadden said.

The office also was beset by another theft in 2008, when a coroner's investigator was convicted of taking items from a man whose death he was investigating.

During a 2013 Fresno County Board of Supervisors meeting to dissolve the Fresno County Coroner-Public Administrator's Office, then-Supervisor Phil Larson cited several incidents of theft. Hadden acknowledged the 2008 case, but said he didn't recall other more recent cases. Larson did not expand on those comments.

"The people who work in the office know they are being watched and if they slip up, we will come down as hard as we can," Hadden said.

Smittcamp said the internal affairs investigation was conducted by her office's Bureau of Investigation.

If criminal charges are filed, she said, the case would have to be prosecuted by another agency, either the state Attorney General, the U.S. Attorney or prosecutors from another county's district attorney's office.

Anyone seeking information on an estate that may have been compromised can call (559) 600-2115 or email at publicadmin@co.fresno.ca.us and include the name of the person, date of death, address, relationship and contact information.

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