

COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER



TOM LINDFORS PHOTOS

Schachtner is proposing an annual ceremony during which unclaimed remains would be buried in the county cemetery on North Fourth Street.

'It's hard to imagine not being missed'

Medical examiners see jump in unclaimed remains

BY TOM LINDFORS
Contributor

NEW RICHMOND - When I die, my wish is to have my ashes spread along the trails that I walk everyday. They wind their way along the edge of a marsh, up and down hills through a forest filled with oaks, maples, birch and aspen, along the shore of a lake up onto a ridge, behind a stand of cedars and finally past a giant red oak we call grandfather.

My ashes will be laid on top of those of my ancestors and friends both two-legged and four. Even if there is no after-life, no heaven or greater consciousness, no reincarnation, and it really is only dust to dust, I take great comfort in knowing whose company I will be joining.

What if there were no one, no one to carry out my wish or worse yet, I did not express my wish, write it down for someone to carry out?

As Patty Schachtner opened the lateral file drawer, inside I could see several plastic boxes. The boxes contained the ashes, cremains, of four unclaimed individuals.

In her 2021 annual report, St. Croix County Medical Examiner Patty Schachtner reported that she had for the first time ever, the unclaimed remains of four people. And it is not just Schachtner, her colleagues in other counties are seeing the same thing, a rise in unclaimed remains.

According to a story in the Washington Post in 2020, there were more than one million unclaimed bodies in a single year in the U.S.

"This is my unclaimed drawer. We've had 812 deaths so far this year (2021), and we have four actual sets of unclaimed cremains. I've never had unclaimed cremains before. To have this many in one year and with the trend that is going on across the nation, that tells me that we have to start planning for this," Schachtner said.

Not unknown

To be clear, unclaimed does not necessarily mean



TOM LINDFORS

"It's hard to imagine not being missed by somebody. When I finally come to grips with it, that they are not going to come to pick them up, it just makes me sad, sad that that care is not there." -- Medical Examiner Patty Schachtner.

"We've had 812 deaths so far this year (2021), and we have four actual sets of unclaimed cremains. I've never had unclaimed cremains before. To have this many in one year and with the trend that is going on across the nation, that tells me that we have to start planning for this."

Patty Schachtner, St. Croix County Medical Examiner

unknown. Schachtner knows the identity of all four people. No one has come forward to claim or bury the remains.

Every death requires a death certificate. A typical death certificate consists of three parts: a section identifying the decedent including name, sex, Social Security number, date of birth, place of birth, address, marital status, name of spouse, names of parents, where death occurred, method of disposition and place of disposition.

A second section detailing the cause and manner of death including date, time and place of death, primary cause

of death, factors contributing to the death, whether or not an autopsy was performed, manner of death and details if the death was the result of an injury; and a third section detailing the decedent's education, occupation and race.

"The death certificate is the final chapter. A life starts with a birth certificate, you have the fun stuff, the heartbreaking stuff and then the last chapter, what your demise was. If something is missing, the story is incomplete," said Schachtner.

If a death occurs in a hospital or someplace where a doctor is on staff or otherwise

available a doctor can make the official pronouncement of death. If the death happens somewhere else, at home, on the job, anywhere out in the world, or at the scene of an accident, suicide or murder, it typically falls to a medical examiner to determine the cause and manner of death.

In some instances the cause of death may be obvious, an accident or suicide. If the circumstances surrounding the death are suspicious, an autopsy might be required.

However, even if one is not performed, Schachtner and her staff will still conduct a thorough review of the per-

son's medical records, run a toxicology report, blood analysis and do the best they can to determine the cause and manner of the death of that person.

"The death certificate is filed with cause and manner based on our scientific findings. All of that information automatically becomes part of our (database). If it was due to heart disease or a communicable disease it becomes part of that database, an accident or suicide, it becomes part of that data. We dedicate time and resources to each case no matter what that person's circumstances. Just because someone is unclaimed, we can't just say they don't matter," said Schachtner.

One of the first and most important steps in a death investigation is to find an informant, someone who knew the decedent, a family member, friend, work associate, someone who is familiar with the decedent's wishes for their disposition, whether they wanted to be buried, cremated, or even transported to another state or country.

"My job is to find the next of kin and get the final disposition going. We engage with family, talk to family members, ask them what their wishes are. Usually they are not from around here," said Schachtner.

In the case of the four sets of remains currently in the medical examiner's office, the decedents have been identified. A death certificate has been completed, all that remains to be determined is the disposition of the body.

The ME's office has limited refrigeration capacity. If the remains go unclaimed after 10 days, they are officially classified as unclaimed.

"People die everyday. In St Croix County, we service 85 different funeral homes. You have to have a reasonable time for disposition. They cannot sit in our cooler or in a morgue indefinitely. We need the space for other decedents. After they've been in our

See Unclaimed Page A11