

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 23, 2024

Dallas County Medical Examiner Office
2355 North Stemmons Freeway
Dallas, Texas 75207

Tarrant County Medical Examiner Office
200 Feliks Gwozdz Place
Fort Worth, TX 76104

Dear Government Officials:

We write to express our grave concerns around your offices' policies and practices regarding unclaimed remains of deceased individuals. Specifically, we have been notified of reports that your office has repeatedly failed in its legal duty to contact reachable family members of the deceased prior to declaring remains as "unclaimed" and providing such remains to entities to use for medical research. Furthermore, we are shocked that in several cases, such remains were those of United States veterans who are entitled to specific death and burial benefits.

On September 16, 2024, NBC News published findings from its 10-month investigation into the practices of the Dallas County Medical Examiner and Tarrant County Medical Examiner regarding unclaimed bodies. The investigation scrutinized how your offices sent thousands of unclaimed bodies to the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth, Texas for medical training and research, often without the consent or knowledge of the deceased or their relatives.¹ While Texas is one of a handful of states that allows for the transfer of unclaimed remains to be used for medical research, the law also sets forth clear requirements for doing so—specifically, that death investigators file an affidavit with the county clerk stating that investigators “made a diligent inquiry to find a relative and stating the inquiry the person made.”²

These actions purportedly saved “Dallas and Tarrant counties each . . . half-million dollars a year on burial and cremation” costs,³—yet these savings frequently occurred as a result of repeated failures by investigators in Dallas and Tarrant counties, and the Health Science Center, to find and contact relatives of the unclaimed bodies. Indeed, between 2019 to 2023, your offices provided over a thousand unclaimed bodies to the Health Science Center, of which more than 800 were then used for research and study.⁴ The report then found that the remains were then cremated,

¹ Mike Hixenbaugh, Jon Schuppe, & Susan Carroll, *Cut Up and Leased Out, the Bodies of the Poor Suffer a Final Indignity in Texas*, NBC News (Sept. 16, 2024), www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-north-texas-corpses-dissected-unclaimed-bodies-rcna170478.

² Tex. Health & Safety Code Ann. § 691.025 (West).

³ Mike Hixenbaugh, Jon Schuppe, & Susan Carroll, *5 Things to Know About NBC News' Investigation into Unclaimed Bodies Used for Research in Texas* (Sept. 16, 2024), www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-north-texas-unclaimed-bodies-investigation-takeaways-rcna171195.

⁴ *Supra*, note 1.

interred at area cemeteries, or scattered at sea, despite the fact that many of these individuals' families failed to receive notice of the unclaimed remains and "were looking for them."⁵

We are particularly concerned by your mismanagement of the remains of Mr. Victor Honey—a U.S. veteran who served 10 years in the United States Army. Despite the fact that Mr. Honey has a son who shares both his first and last name and lives in the Dallas area, his son and family were never contacted to claim his remains. Mr. Honey's remains were then given to Health Science Center for medical research. Under federal law, veterans and veterans' dependents are entitled to certain funeral benefits, including, among other things, funds that assist with the costs of burials and funeral services, as well as possible burial locations and relocation to national VA cemeteries.⁶ By failing to contact Mr. Honey's family, he was deprived of the rights he earned by bravely serving our country. This case alone raises serious concerns regarding how Dallas and Tarrant County investigators attempt to satisfy the "diligent inquiry" requirement set forth by state law.

We are aware that the NBC investigation sparked widespread and immediate changes including the suspension of the body donation program at the Health Science Center, a temporary moratorium on all out-of-state shipments of cadavers, and the suspension or cessation of multiple contracts between the Health Science Center and various contractors.⁷ Additionally, just last week, Tarrant County issued a new policy detailing how it will now proceed with managing the remains of individuals.^{8,9} While we welcome these changes, they do not erase the pain and grief thousands of families are feeling as a result of the failures detailed in the investigation by NBC, nor do they ensure that proper safeguards are now in place to prevent the unapproved cremation of individuals or veterans who may readily be contactable next of kin.

Given these shocking revelations and ongoing concerns about future similar actions by your offices, **we request that you respond to the following questions no later than November 30, 2024.**

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⁵ *Id.*

⁶ 38 U.S.C § 2303.

⁷ Lana Ferguson, *UNT Health Science Center Suspends Program that Used Unclaimed Bodies, Closes Lab*, Dallas Morning News (Sept. 16, 2024), www.dallasnews.com/business/health-care/2024/09/16/unt-health-science-center-suspends-program-that-used-unclaimed-bodies-closes-lab/.

⁸ Letter from Tarrant County Texas Commissioners, on Consideration of Policy for the Disposition of Deceased Paupers (Oct. 15, 2024), www.documentcloud.org/documents/25214480-new-tarrant-county-unclaimed-body-policy.

⁹ As of the date of this letter, we have yet to see any public policy proposal by Dallas County, Texas Medical Examiner's Office.

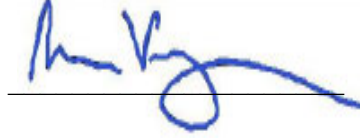
- 1) How many unclaimed remains has your office provided to medical and health research facilities over the last five years?
- 2) Does your office (or an entity contracted through your office) record its efforts to contact family members of the deceased individuals?
 - a) If no, please explain why it does not.
 - b) If yes, please provide information regarding:
 - i) The average number of attempts made to contact a family member of the deceased during the 48-hour period after the individual's death.
 - ii) Any public, online database you (or a third-party contracted through your office) may/may not offer to identify the names of deceased individuals in your possession.
 1. If you do offer a public database, please provide details regarding the frequency in which information is updated online.
3. Has your office identified any specific barriers to contacting family members of the deceased? If so, please describe them.
4. Does your office have established procedures to contact the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs or a veteran service organization to identify whether a deceased individual is a United States veteran or a veteran's dependent eligible to be interred in a veteran's cemetery?
 - a. If yes, please provide information related to that process.
 - b. If no, please provide information regarding:
 - i. What specific actions, if any, were taken to determine whether the deceased individual was a veteran or a veteran's dependent who is entitled to burial benefits?
 - ii. The number of times, if any, employees in your office sought assistance to determine whether a deceased individual in its care was a veteran or a veteran's dependent eligible to be interred in a veteran's cemetery?
5. If your office currently does not have established policies to determine whether a deceased individual is a United States veteran or a veteran's dependent eligible to be interred in a veteran's cemetery, will you commit to establishing such policies within the next 30 days?
6. What, if any, efforts have been made by your office to recover the remains of individuals whose families did not receive proper due diligence and outreach?
7. What, if any, plan does your office have for providing restitution to families who failed to receive proper notice from you?

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Sincerely,

A blue ink handwritten signature of Jasmine Crockett, written over a horizontal line.

Jasmine Crockett
Member of Congress
Texas' 30th Congressional District

A blue ink handwritten signature of Marc Veasey, written over a horizontal line.

Marc Veasey
Member of Congress
Texas' 33rd Congressional District