

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

At a Glance

Commissioner James R. Gill, MD, Chief Medical Examiner

Deputy Commissioner Maura E. DeJoseph, DO, Deputy Chief Medical Examiner

Established – July, 1970.

Statutory authority - Conn Gen Statutes Sec. 19a-400-415

Address: 11 Shuttle Road, Farmington, CT 06032

Average number of employees – 51 full-time authorized; 51 full-time, 15 part-time

Recurring Operating expenses (2020-2021): \$7,616,502.

Capital Equipment Purchase Fund expenses (2020-2021): \$78,120.

Federal Grants Impact (2020-2021): \$581,217.

Irwin H Lepow Trust Fund expense (2020-2021): \$12,690.

Collected revenue (2020-2021): \$3,349,474.

Mission

The mission of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is to:

- Investigate reported deaths
- Accurately certify the cause and manner of death
- Explain and clarify investigative findings for the family
- Identify, document, and interpret relevant forensic scientific information for use in criminal and civil legal proceedings necessary in the investigation of violent, suspicious, and unexpected deaths.
- Provide information to legitimate interested parties per law and regulation.
- Use investigative information to protect the public health.

Our goal is to investigate deaths presented to this Office in a timely and high quality manner; transport and then be able to release the remains within 24 hours; and complete 90% of OCME reports within sixty days of the investigation.

Medicolegal investigations protect the public by producing accurate vital statistics, providing information that may prevent unnecessary litigation, protect those who may have been falsely accused, and assist the courts in the proper adjudication of criminal matters; diagnosing suspected and unsuspected contagious disease; identifying hazardous environmental conditions in the workplace, in the home, and elsewhere; identifying trends such as changes in homicidal, motor vehicular, infectious diseases, and drug-related death rates; and identify new types and forms of drugs appearing in the state, or existing drugs/substances becoming new subjects of abuse.

The mission of the Office is accomplished by three sections: Pathology, Laboratory, and Management Services. The OCME is located on the grounds of the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington and operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, year round.

Statutory Responsibility

The Connecticut General Statutes dictate which deaths are reportable to the Medical Examiner's Office. It is then the OCME's responsibility to determine whether or not jurisdiction should be assumed and what

investigative functions need to be exercised in order to execute the statutory mandate. Reportable cases include:

- All violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths.
- All deaths related to poisoning, drug abuse, or addiction.
- Deaths related to employment or which constitute a threat to the public health.
- Deaths of people whose bodies are to be cremated.
- Deaths that occur outside of a normal hospital setting.
- Deaths under anesthesia in the operating room, recovery room or those resulting from diagnostic or therapeutic procedures must be called into our office.
- Death, not clearly the result of natural causes that occurs while the deceased person is in the custody of a peace officer or a law enforcement agency or the Commissioner of Correction.

Chapter 368q of the Connecticut General Statutes places OCME under the control and supervision of the Commission on Medicolegal Investigations whose members are appointed by the Governor.

Commission membership during fiscal year 2020-2021:

Chair: Todd Fernow, JD, University of Connecticut, School of Law

Vice Chair: John Sinard, MD, PhD, Professor of Pathology, Yale University, School of Medicine

Sidney Hopfer, PhD, Professor of Pathology, University of Connecticut, School of Medicine

Celia Pinzi, Public Member, West Haven

Vacancy, School of Law

Michael T. McCormack, JD, Connecticut Bar Association

Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford, MD, Commissioner, Department of Public Health

Designee Olinda Morales, JD

Susan Keane Baker, MHA, Public Member, New Canaan

Michael Krinsky, MD, CT Med Society

Public Service

The chief recipients of our public service are the next-of-kin of the decedents who come under our jurisdiction. Our goal is to investigate and certify these deaths in a timely, high quality, efficient, and caring manner. The expeditious removal and then release of the remains to the funeral home is part of this process. Our work also involves and/or benefits treating physicians, law enforcement agencies, funeral directors, the legal system, public health agencies, and the general public. We gauge our forensic practice through accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) and a variety of office metrics for completion of autopsy reports and length of time for examination completion. Our medical record's section responded to 6,129 written requests for reports and sent out 4,073 reports to various governmental agencies and 1,298 to families, attorneys, and insurance companies. We have begun a computer-based protocol for handling the documents that we generate and have expedited several processes through the use of this technology.

In addition to normal agency operations, we receive and respond to innumerable requests for information from state, municipal and federal agencies, research facilities, and many other organizations who utilize our data. The OCME's information technology (IT) section produced substantial computerized statistical reports during the year including substance abuse and homicide data. Recipients included State's Attorneys, several State agencies, Public Defenders, hospital quality control departments, researchers, and the media.

We participate in data collection for the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), State Unintentional Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS), and the Department of Defense (MIMIC) project. We are active members of the Child Fatality and Maternal Mortality Review Commissions, as well as participate in hospital-based trauma death reviews. We have collaborative relationships with the Yale Center for Injury Prevention and Control Research.

Pathology residents (from training programs at Yale, Hartford Hospital, and Danbury Hospital) and master degree candidates in Forensic Sciences (from the University of New Haven) typically spend an elective rotation at the OCME. Pathologist's Assistants (master degree candidates) from Quinnipiac University spend a rotation observing and assisting in the performance of autopsies. Educational programs have been provided to law enforcement personnel, medical students at Yale University School of Medicine and University of Connecticut, physician assistant students from Sacred Heart University, and for many professional and community groups across the state.

Table 1 Fiscal Year Statistics:

	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	2 year % Increase
Total Reported Deaths	22,748	27,944	27,483	21%
Total Investigated Cremations	19,058	22,631	22,072	16%
Total Deaths Certified	4,098	5,050	5,719	40%
Total Autopsies	2,525	2,908	3,103	23%
COVID Investigations (suspected and confirmed)	0	5,140	5,111	N/A

Improvements/Achievements 2020-2021

Our agency is designated as an essential public health facility, therefore our essential staff worked predominantly on-site during the **COVID-19** pandemic that began in March 2020 in Connecticut. OCME recorded all deaths caused or contributed to by COVID-19 and shared this data with the Department of Public Health on a daily basis.

We continued to have full accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), following our annual review in September 2020. **We are striving to meet the growing operational demands within the same building structure since 1986. Renovation or construction projects are being pursued. This includes an evaluation to enlarge the autopsy area, and add more refrigerated body storage space. Bond funding has been approved to initiate the assessment and evaluation/feasibility of the facility project.** NAME will perform a site visit in January 2022. Due to facility constraints (as described above) and a marked increase in death investigations (see Table 1), we anticipate that we will lose full accreditation. We are working with OPM to find an appropriately sized budget that will allow us to expand our staffing in critical areas to meet these work increases.

We are working collaboratively with Department of Consumer Protection (DCP) on an information sharing interface that will allow for monitoring and reporting of deaths due to overdoses, with the objective of harm reduction for our citizens. Additionally we are actively engaged in the roll-out of the statewide electronic death registry (EDRS) through a pilot program sponsored by DPH Vital Records.

We have received several other grant award both solely and in collaboration with Division of Scientific Services, Department of Public Health, Office of Policy and Management, and the U.S. Department of Defense:

<u>Grant</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>\$\$</u>
Coronavirus Relief Fund	Wages	\$15,387
Coronavirus Relief Fund	Fringe	\$11,114
2019 Paul Coverdell OCME	Goods and Services	\$22,968
2020 Paul Coverdell-OCME	Goods and Services	\$66,325
2020_CESF	Goods and Services	\$56,091
Coronavirus Relief Fund	Goods and Services	\$90,484
FEMA_FFY2020	Goods and Services	\$17,860
JAG2016DJBX0652	Goods and Services	\$22,250
Log#2020-0089	Goods and Services	\$278,739
<u>Grand Total</u>		<u>\$581,217</u>

Laboratory Services: The NAME accreditation benchmark for toxicology reporting is that 90% or more of toxicology reports must be completed within 90 days to avoid a loss of accreditation For fiscal year 2020-2021, over 90% of the National Medical Services (NMS) toxicology reports were completed within 30 days and 99% in 90 days; the average NMS toxicology report turn-around time was 17 days. Beginning in August, 2016, toxicology testing on certain fatalities (homicides, traumatic suicides, and motor vehicle collisions) were sent to the Connecticut Division of Scientific Services under Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP). For fiscal year 2020-2021, DESPP/Division of Scientific Services did not perform toxicology testing for the OCME due to COVID-19. Instead, these specimens were sent to NMS starting in March of 2020.

The OCME has an active Anthropology Laboratory service, under the direction of a part-time, board-certified Forensic Anthropologist. She has been essential to the death investigation of skeletonized remains and unidentified persons.

We maintain an active in-house Histology Laboratory. This service allows our Pathologists timely ability to review microscopy for death investigations.

We have started molecular investigations for various hereditary heart diseases (channelopathies, cardiomyopathies) by taking advantage of pro bono testing offered by a commercial laboratory for medical examiner offices.

We have established relationships with Jackson Laboratories for COVID-19 testing of the deceased and also the UCONN Health Laboratories for other microbiology testing.

Pathology Services: We have worked with the department of Public Health (DPH) on the new electronic death registration system (EDRS) to replace paper death certificates and enhance public health mortality statistics. The system currently covers New London County.

We currently have 9 forensic pathologists and use per diem forensic pathologists to balance the volume of death investigations requiring autopsy appropriately. We anticipate hiring a 10th full-time forensic pathologist during 2021-2022. Homicides and accidental drug intoxication deaths have increased.

A forensic pathology fellowship training program was created in a joint effort between OCME and University of Connecticut Medical School. This program is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). Two forensic pathology fellows began their one year program of study on July 1, 2021. This program will increase the number of physicians entering into forensic pathology – helping a national shortage. We expect that the trainees will improve caseload balance and result in an academic environment with continue quality improvement.

Management Services: The business office has reduced the outstanding accounts receivable balance while working with agency customers. We have added an electronic cremation billing service with the new EDRS system which will allow for real-time payments.

The facility is under the control of the Department of Administrative Services Bureau of Properties and Facilities Management and managed by a private company.

Health and safety issues are continually addressed with the expected result of a better environment for the employees and protection of evidence. Our safety committee is highly active and productive.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The agency remains committed to the principles of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity. Our affirmative action plan was fully approved by Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO). Additionally, the OCME exceeded the fiscal year 2020 certified small business purchases [334%] and certified minority business enterprise purchases [170%] goals set by the Department of Administrative Services. As required by state statute, the agency provides required data reports and information to the Office of Policy and Management, Office of Fiscal Analysis, and the Office of the State Comptroller on a continuous basis.

Our website is regularly accessed by interested individuals. Please visit our website at <http://www.ct.gov/ocme>