

Fiscal Year 2023-2024

Agency: Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

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

Number of employees – 63 full-time authorized; 23 part-time; 6 per diem.

General Fund Operating Budget (2023-2024): \$10,190,194.

Capital Equipment Purchase Fund-Expense (2023-2024): \$17,929.

Federal Grants Impact-Expense (2023-2024): \$1,239,705.

Irwin H Lepow Trust Fund Balance (2023-2024): \$25,657.

General Fund Collected Revenue-State Treasurer (2023-2024): \$3,282,785.

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, examine and then be able to release the remains to a funeral home 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 2022-2023:

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

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

Secretary: Sidney Hopfer, PhD, Professor of Pathology, UConn, School of Medicine

Manisha Juthani MD, Commissioner, Department of Public Health, *ex officio*

Designee: Elizabeth Frugale

Susan Keane Baker, MHA, Public Member

Celia Pinzi, Public Member

Michael Krinsky, MD, CT Med Society

Jennifer L. Bourne, JD, Office of the Chief Public Defender

Vacancy, School of Law

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 works with funeral homes and the public for in a multitude of capacities to provide exceptional service. Our website has important information and links to staffing, records, resources, and details on our agency. By improving our staffing, processes, and procedures we have expedited our turnaround times of records request and in most cases, have been able to provide immediate communication to the public. Some of the process's changes included digitalization of records for requests and the ability to provide digital correspondence. We have improved the process of auditing our permanent records for storage, they are safe and secure. We work cohesively with our state and government agencies. We strive to always continue to improve and serve the public with compassion and understanding. We responded to 7,604 written requests for reports and sent out 5,051 reports to various governmental agencies/hospitals and 2,553 to families, attorneys, and insurance companies. We began a computer-based protocol for handling the documents that we generate and have expedited several processes using this technology. Our agency received an estimated 80-120 calls per day.

In addition to normal agency operations, we receive and respond to innumerable requests for information from state, municipal and federal agencies, research facilities, and 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 Drug 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's degree candidates in Forensic Sciences (from the University of New Haven) typically spend an elective rotation at the OCME. Pathologist's Assistants (master's 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 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total Reported Deaths	27,937	27,477	27,484	25,927	22,585
Total Investigated Cremations	22,633	22,129	22,660	22,133	22,260
Total Deaths Certified	5,049	5,720	5,580	5,190	4,651
Total Autopsies	2,911	3,105	3,241	3,028	2,867

Improvements/Achievements 2023-2024

We have been striving to meet the growing operational demands within the same building structure since 1986. We began our investigation into increasing our facility size (expansion/renovation) in August of 2020. We recently completed an updated and enhanced assessment for an OCME facility to meet our current and future work effort. This process had a nationally recognized architectural firm with expertise in forensic autopsy facilities do an in-depth analysis of the size, scope, and location based on professional laboratory design standards, regulations, and our current and projected work needs. They found that a preliminary 2021 design was significantly undersized. Given the age of the current facility and the need for the OCME to maintain a 24/7/365-day operation that cannot be temporarily closed or moved along with geographic obstacles for expansion of the current facility (e.g., wetlands, property boundaries), we believe that a new facility is the best solution. We are working with DAS and OPM regarding various proposals and the need for increased funding through the Bond Commission.

Currently the autopsy and refrigerated body storage space are markedly undersized for our workload. This has required the addition of one refrigerated tractor trailers for storage of remains and one container unit for storage of supplies. Due to inadequate facility size, our accreditation was downgraded to provisional status. We have been able to expand our staffing in critical areas to meet work increases. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, our autopsy totals have returned to the prior baseline (Table 1).

We have received several other grant awards both solely and in collaboration with Division of Scientific Services, Department of Public Health, Office of Policy and Management, Bureau of Justice Assistance, and the CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

<u>Grant</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Federal Grants Impact Expense</u>
<i>2020--DQ-BX-0033_FY23 Fellow</i>	<i>Salary, Fringe, Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$22,538</i>
<i>15PBJA-21-GG-02943-SLFO_FY24Fellows</i>	<i>Salary, Fringe, Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$255,888</i>
<i>2022 Paul Coverdell-OCME</i>	<i>Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$146,977</i>
<i>DPH Log # 2023-0096</i>	<i>Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$428,473</i>
<i>ARPA-COVID-Related Expenditure</i>	<i>Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$367,047</i>
<i>NNPHI_CDC</i>	<i>Goods and Services</i>	<i>\$18,782</i>
<u>Grand Total</u>		<u>\$1,239,705</u>

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.

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 2023-2024, 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 18 days.

The OCME has an active Anthropology Laboratory service, under the direction of a part-time, board-certified Forensic Anthropologist. Our board-certified forensic anthropologist 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 perform molecular investigations for various hereditary heart diseases (channelopathies, cardiomyopathies). We have established relationships with UCONN Health Laboratories for other microbiology testing.

Pathology Services: We have worked with the department of Public Health (DPH) on the electronic death registration system (EDRS) to enhance public health mortality statistics. The OCME uses it and is working on developing a bridge to link to our case management system.

Due to increase casework and staffing issues, our 60-day turn-around time decreased to 85% (goal >90%), however our 90-day turn-around-time was 95% (goal > 90%). Having hired three (3) full-time forensic pathologists in the Summer of 2024, we now have 11 forensic pathologists which has allowed us to reduce our per diem use and should improve our report turn-around-times.

We have 17 medicolegal death investigators and 11 are certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. They are on 24/7/365 days and handle case triage and medical legal death investigations. They attend scenes of OCME deaths. In FY 2024, they attended over 96% of our scene deaths.

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). Since starting in July of 2012, we have trained five forensic pathology fellows. One new fellow started in July of 2024. This program continues to increase the number of physicians entering the forensic pathology field, and ultimately help decrease the national shortage.

Management Services: The Electronic Death Registry System cremation credit card payment module has matured and will eventually totally replace the Core-CT billing work effort. With the increased use of the States Electronic Death registration System (EDRS), our outstanding account receivable balances have decreased considerably. The agency underwent an audit by the Auditors of Public Accounts for fiscal years ended June 30, 2022 and 2023 ([OCME Audit Report](#))

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. Our Health and Safety Committee is highly active and meet quarterly to discuss concerns. During this period, they have taken the initiative to update policies and procedures, created a Fire Safety and Evacuation Plan and a Visitor Policy to promote safety in the workplace.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The agency remains committed to the principles of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity. Our last affirmative action plan was fully approved by Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO). As required by state statute, the agency provides required fiscal 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>.

Office of the Governor
Executive Chambers
State Capitol
Hartford, CT 06106