



N.C. Department of Health  
and Human Services

# **Description of North Carolina's Statewide Medical Examiner System**

**Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services  
Medical Examiner Subcommittee**

**September 29, 2014**

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Chief Medical Examiner**



## Current Roles & Responsibilities

### Coroner

- **Not part of the ME system unless meets criteria and appointed by CME**
- **Elected county official**
- **Generally no medical training**
- **Coroners grandfathered in as MEs in 1972**
- **9 counties have coroners**
- **Cannot certify a death unless meets ME criteria and appointed by CME**

### Medical Examiner

- **County; appointed by CME to 3-year term**
  - **Prefer physicians, but can be physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nurses, coroners, emergency medical technician-paramedics**
- **Part-time work; not State employees**
- **Determines if a death falls under ME jurisdiction**
- **Voluntarily ensures deaths are adequately investigated**
- **Files investigative report to OCME**
- **Certifies death**



## Current Roles & Responsibilities

### Pathologist

- Uses laboratory examination of body fluids, cell samples and tissues, including the autopsy, to diagnose disease and cause of death
- 19% of N.C. medicolegal autopsies are performed by pathologists

### Forensic Pathologist

- A pathologist with sub-specialty training in determining the cause of sudden and unexpected deaths or deaths due to external or violent means
- Skilled in performing autopsies to determine the presence of disease or injury and to collect medicolegal evidence
- Trained in forensic sciences such as toxicology, wound ballistics, trace evidence, serology, anthropology, and odontology
- Evaluates historical and law-enforcement information to certify manner of death
- Forensic pathologists practice in each regional autopsy center



## Current Roles & Responsibilities

### Autopsy Center

**Location where medicolegal autopsies are performed**

- **OCME**
- **Regional Autopsy Centers**
  - **East Carolina University**
  - **Wake Forest University**
  - **Mecklenburg County ME Office**
- **5 hospitals**

### Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

- **Central office for Medical Examiners Information System (MEIS)**
- **24/7 consultation service**
- **Oversight of deaths in NC due to:**
  - **Injury or violence**
  - **Natural deaths that are suspicious, unusual or unattended by a medical professional**
  - **Deaths with potential threat to public health**
- **Identify patterns to reduce preventable deaths**
- **NC Child Fatality Prevention Team**
  - **Makes recommendations to prevent child fatalities**



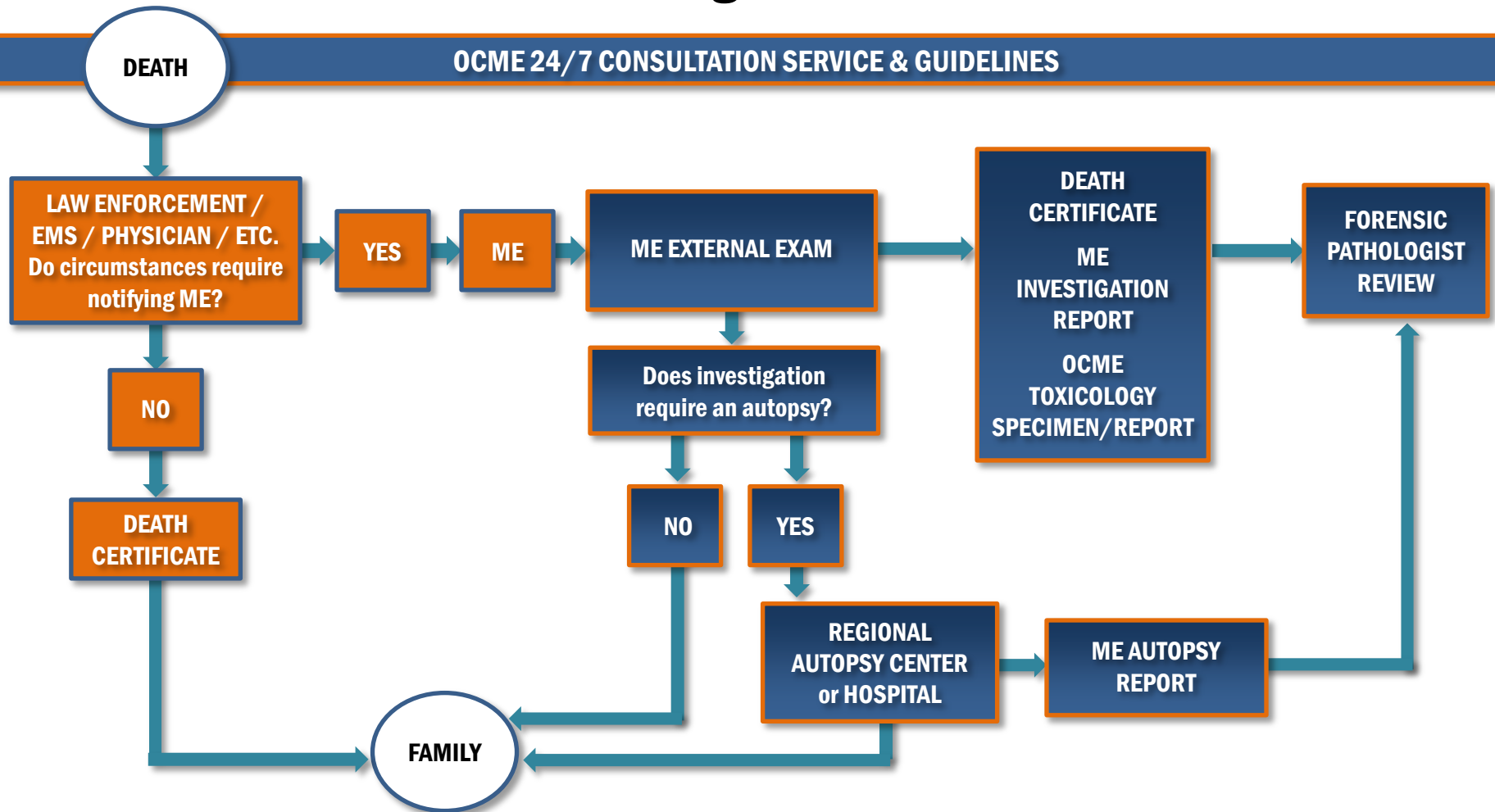
## **Other Potential Role**

### **Medicolegal Death Investigator (MDI)**

- **Investigates deaths under ME jurisdiction**
- **Responsible for the body; law enforcement is responsible for the scene**
- **Performs scene investigations and determines if further investigation is necessary**
- **Most medically knowledgeable person at the scene**
- **No formal education requirements**

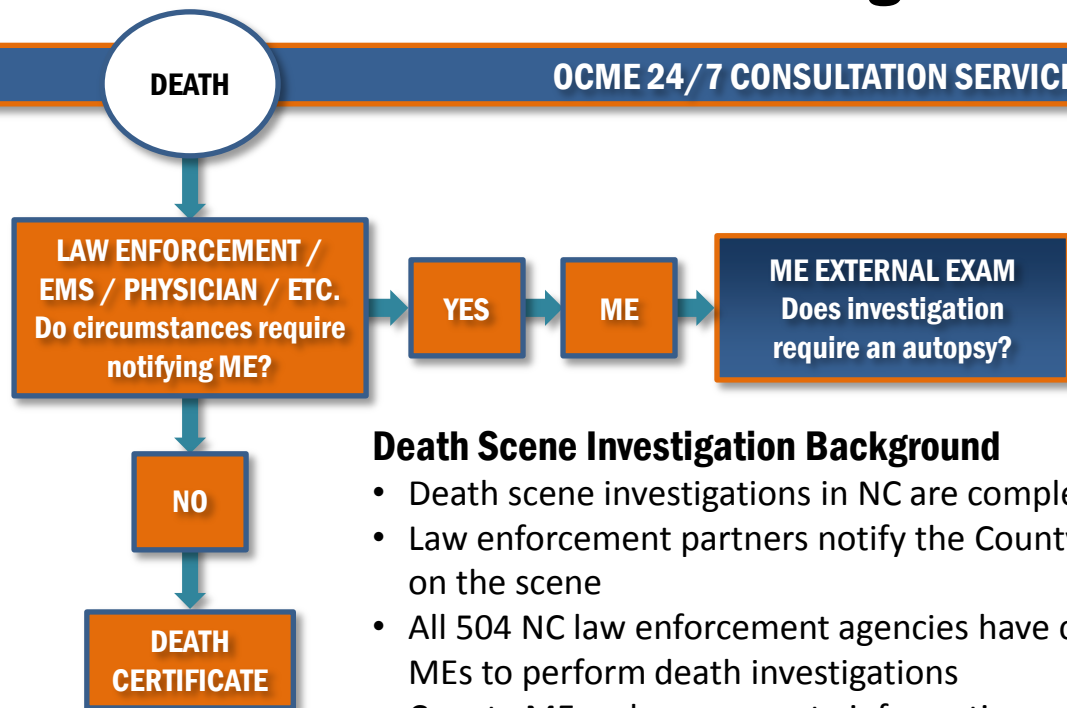


# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process





# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process

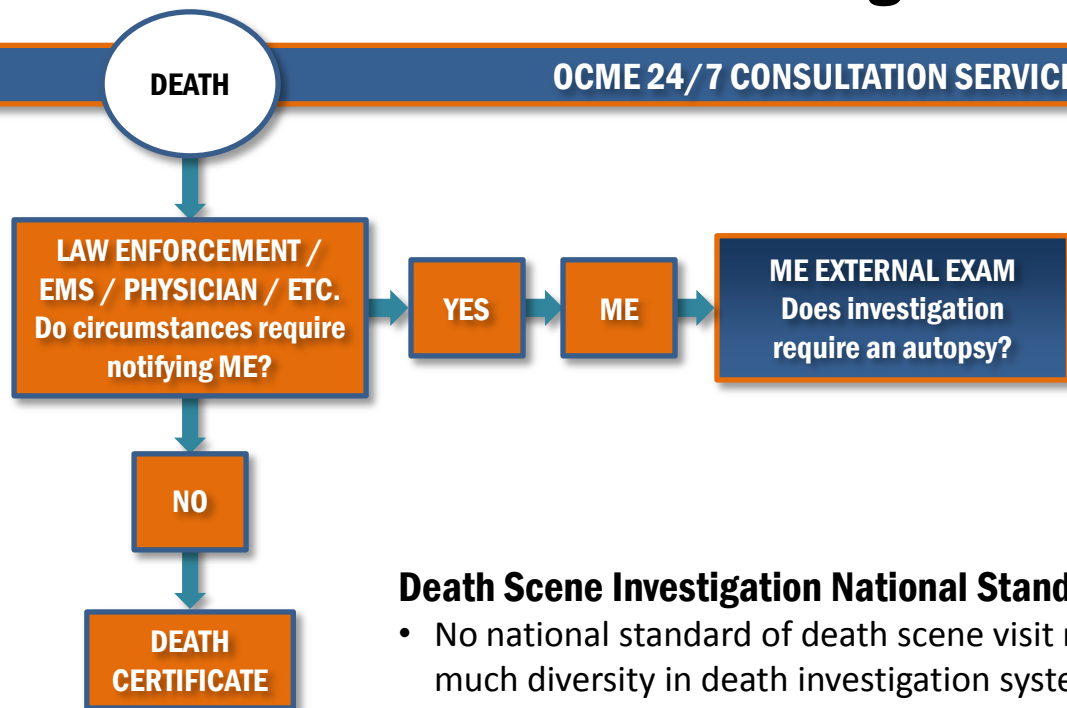


## Death Scene Investigation Background

- Death scene investigations in NC are completed by law enforcement
- Law enforcement partners notify the County ME if they seek assistance from the County ME on the scene
- All 504 NC law enforcement agencies have crime scene investigators who work with County MEs to perform death investigations
- County MEs rely on accurate information received from first responders, whether they visit the scene or not
- County MEs are part-time roles; answer assistance requests as available or scheduled
- County MEs must personally view every body under ME jurisdiction, though not necessarily at the scene (not optimal location for a proper investigation), per OCME guidelines
- An external exam of a body cannot be performed at the scene
- County MEs are not employees and, therefore, are not full-time death investigators



# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process



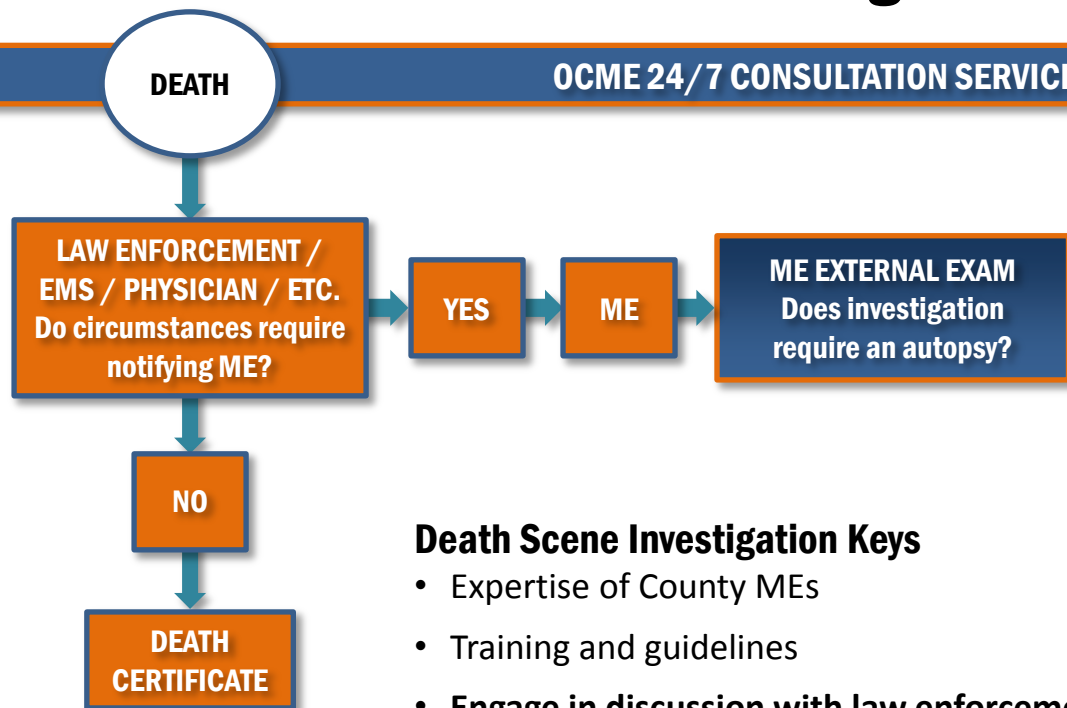
## Death Scene Investigation National Standards

- No national standard of death scene visit requirements for MEs because there is so much diversity in death investigation systems (e.g, city, county, state supervised and region administered vs. statewide system)
- National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) does not require death scene visits for every ME case





# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process



## OCME 24/7 CONSULTATION SERVICE & GUIDELINES

### Death Scene Investigation Keys

- Expertise of County MEs
- Training and guidelines
- **Engage in discussion with law enforcement partners and other first responders** such as EMS and fire departments
- **Medicolegal death investigators (MDIs)** could be adjunct to the appointed medically trained MEs

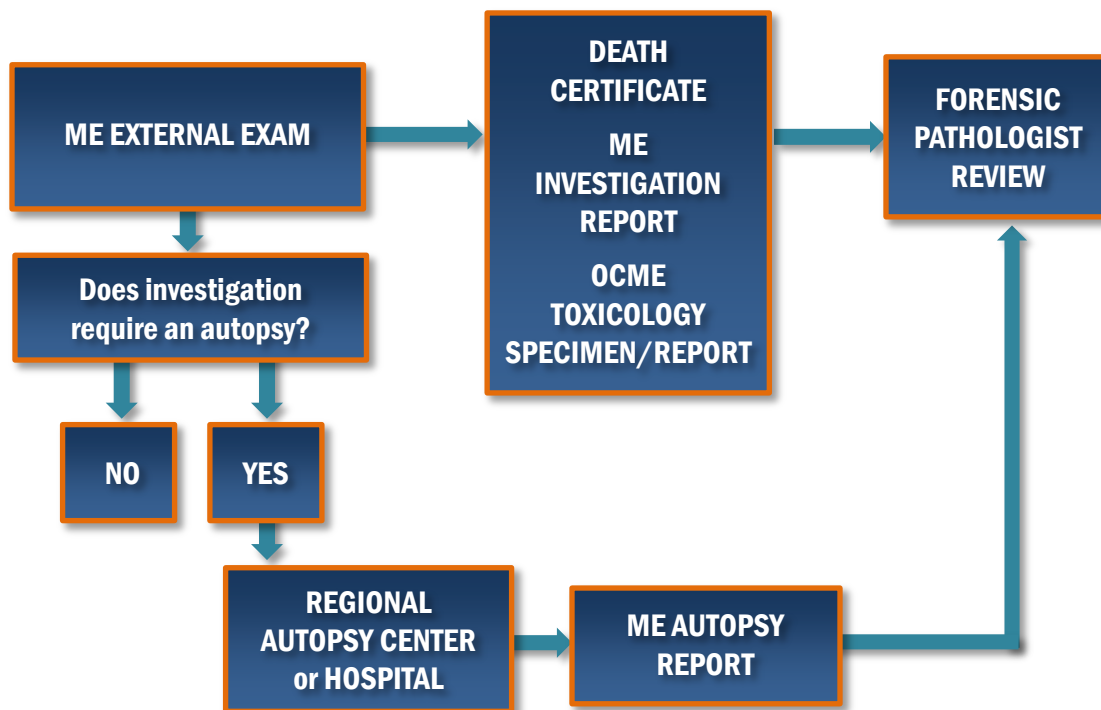


# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process

## OCME 24/7 CONSULTATION SERVICE & GUIDELINES

### Examination of the Body: Background

- Bodies must be transported to nearest autopsy center
- 1/3 of autopsies are conducted at State OCME; NC relies on regional centers to complete additional autopsies
- State OCME forensic pathologists review investigative reports conducted at regional centers



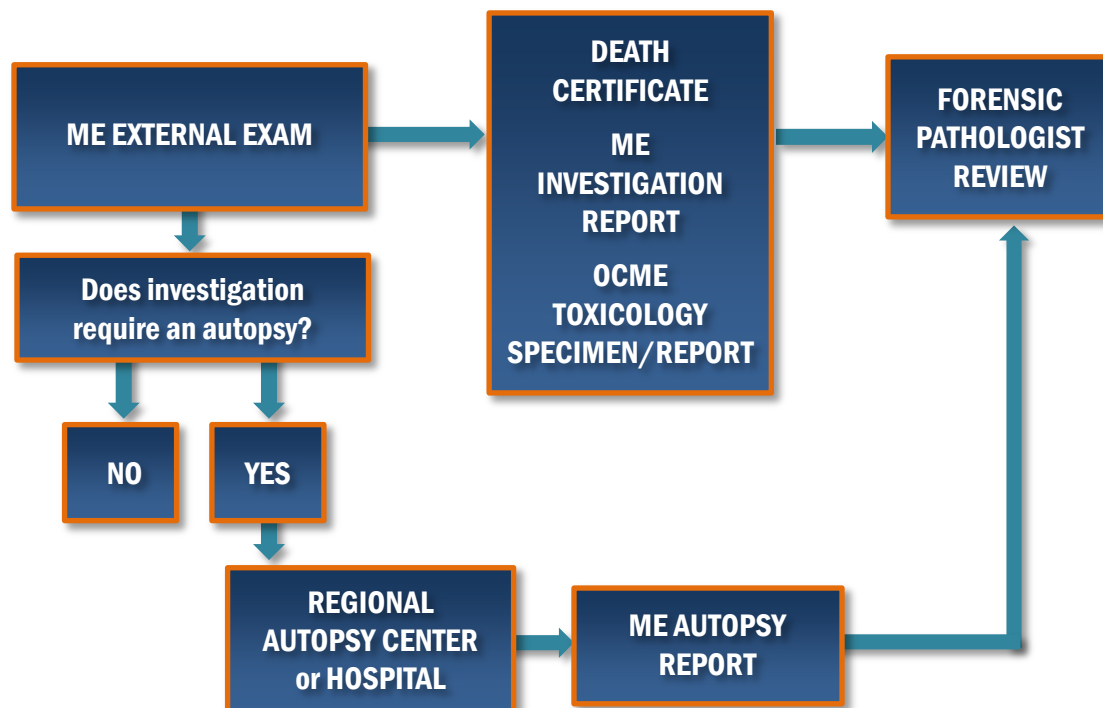


# N.C. Medical Examiner System Investigation Process

## OCME 24/7 CONSULTATION SERVICE & GUIDELINES

### Examination of the Body: National Standards

- All autopsies must be performed by Board Certified Forensic Pathologists for national accreditation
- 81% of autopsies in NC are performed by Board Certified Forensic Pathologists



# North Carolina Medical Examiner System: Milestones

**2010s**

- IT SYSTEM ASSESSMENT
- FORMALIZED REGIONAL AUTOPSY CENTER RELATIONSHIPS
- ADDITIONAL \$1M FUNDING
- ME AUTOPSY FEE: \$1250/CASE (2013: UPDATED FROM \$1000)

**2000s**

- DHHS OFFICE OF POLICY & PLANNING REVIEW
- ME STUDY GROUP

**1990s**

- NC CHILD FATALITY PREVENTION SYSTEM

**1980s**

**1970s**

- CME TO APPOINT MEs FOR 3-YEAR TERM
- COUNTIES MOVED UNDER OCME; OCME GRANTED AUTHORITY TO APPOINT TRAINED PHYSICIANS AS MEs
- REGIONAL AUTOPSY CENTERS DEVELOPED ORGANICALLY
- OCME OPERATES CENTRALIZED TOXICOLOGY LAB AND CENTRAL RECORDKEEPING
- CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER ROLE ESTABLISHED

**1960s  
& earlier**

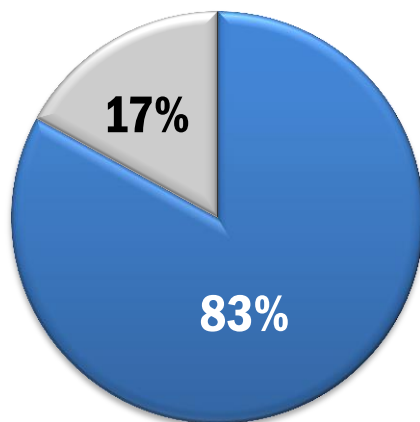
- 1967 - STATEWIDE MEDICAL EXAMINER ACT - CORONER SYSTEM REPLACED; EXISTING CORONERS GRANDFATHERED
- PRE-1967 - INDEPENDENT, COUNTY-ELECTED CORONER SYSTEM



## State and County

### Death Investigations

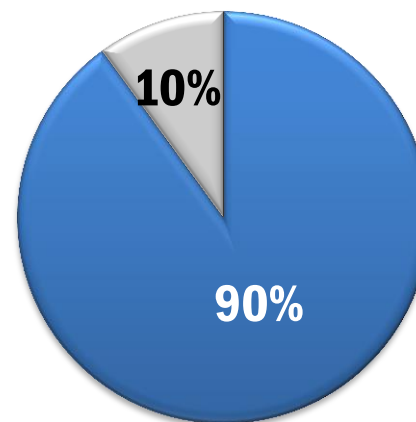
**10,850 Annual Cases**  
**6 calendar-year average**



- County Resident - County pays
- Non-county Resident - State pays

### Autopsies

**3,947 Annual Cases**  
**6 calendar-year average**



- County Resident - County pays
- Non-county Resident - State pays

**State funds statewide body transportation**

**County provides facilities for examination and storage of bodies under ME jurisdiction**