JOINT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

NC Department of Health and Human Services

Death Investigation and Death Certificates

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October 11, 2022
Medical Examiner System Nationally

- National Standard 250 Autopsies per year
  - Maximum 325 Autopsies per year
- OCME 557 Autopsies per year
- National Shortage of Forensic Pathologists
  - 500 practicing board certified forensic pathologists
  - 1280 forensic pathologists needed (shortage of 780)
  - 40 new forensic pathologists per year

SOURCE: The National Association of Medical Examiners
NC Medical Examiner System

• Greater than 30% increase overall from FY 18/19 to FY 21/22
OCME System Case Load

- Increasing NC Population
- Increasing Complexity of Cases
- 49.8% increase from August 2019 to August 2022
NC Medical Examiner System Roles

- C/L ME- County or Local Medical Examiner
- Autopsy Center - Pathologist
  - Standard Autopsies
- Regional Autopsy Center – Forensic Pathologist
  - Complex Autopsies
- Medicolegal Investigators (MDI)
- Forensic Toxicologist
State and Regional Relationships

Regional Autopsy Centers (RAC):
- Wake Forest University (Forsyth County)
- East Carolina University Brody School of Medicine (Pitt County)
- Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner (Mecklenburg County)
  Regional Autopsy Centers (RAC) report to/contract with the OCME and are performed by Forensic Pathologist

Autopsy Centers:
- Mountain Pathology (Jackson County (Sylva, NC))
- Coastal Pathology (Onslow County)
- Falvy Barr, MD (Sampson Regional Medical Center) (Sampson County)
- Southeastern Pathology (Robeson County)
  Pathologist perform autopsies at these locations

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME): the following counties are serviced by OCME:

Alamance, Anson, Bladen, Cabarrus, Caswell, Chatham, Columbus, Cumberland, Durham, Franklin, Granville, Guilford, Harnett, Hoke, Johnston, Lee, Montgomery, Moore, Orange, Person, Randolph, Richmond, Robeson, Rockingham, Rowan, Sampson, Scotland, Stanly, Union, Vance, Wake, Warren, Wayne
State and Regional Relationships

County
- Hires medical examiners
  - Paid per examination; fee set in legislation
- Arranges decedent storage

State-contracted services
- Autopsy Centers covering 67 counties
  - Paid per autopsy; fee set in legislation
- Transporters
  - Fee set in legislation; just increased

State
- Conducts exams for counties not served by RAC
  - Currently serve 33 Counties
- Conducts Toxicology Test Statewide
Medical Examiners

• Medical Examiners in NC
  o Nurse
  o Nurse Practitioner
  o Physician Assistant
  o Physician
  o Emergency Medical Technicians / Paramedics

• Medicolegal Investigators
  o ABMDI Certified
  o Masters in Forensic Science

• Dentist

• Physical Therapist
Forensic Pathology Salaries

- **Average Forensic Pathologist Salary**
  - Nationally $308,000
Autopsy Reimbursement Rates

• NC reimbursement is $2800 (set in 2015)
• Actual cost of autopsy $5800

• Other expenses for autopsy centers
  o Medical Examiner Coverage
  o Reports
  o Supplies and Infrastructure
  o Court Testimony
  o Death Certificate Review
Consequences

• Fewer Medical Examiners available to go on scene pulls on pathologists' time who must go to scene
• Fewer autopsy centers conducting cases means more cases must be absorbed by state OCME
• Both mean longer wait time for families
Efforts

• Implemented transporter fee ($95 to $170) in August but retroactive to July

• Posted 7 forensic pathology positions

• Continuing Fellowship Program for Forensic Pathologists with UNC Chapel Hill

• Developing a pipeline program for Autopsy Technicians

• Conducting Regional Listening Meetings for Autopsy Centers and Medical Examiners.
ME System Conclusions

• Regional Autopsy Centers (RACs) are contractually underfunded by an estimated ~$3000 per autopsy.
  o Increased Burden on OCME
  o Longer Processing Times
  o Retention of RACs
  o Reduced County Coverage

• OCME staff are underpaid to support the growing NC population
NC DAVE: Time for Death Registration Decreased by 95%

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95% Reduction in Death Registration Time from 143.4 to 7.1 days
Death Certificates (NCDAVE)

2022 Death Registration by Method

- **Electronic**
- **Paper**
- **Hybrid**