

JOINT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE
ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

NC Department of Health and Human Services

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) Update

Mark Benton
Chief Deputy Secretary

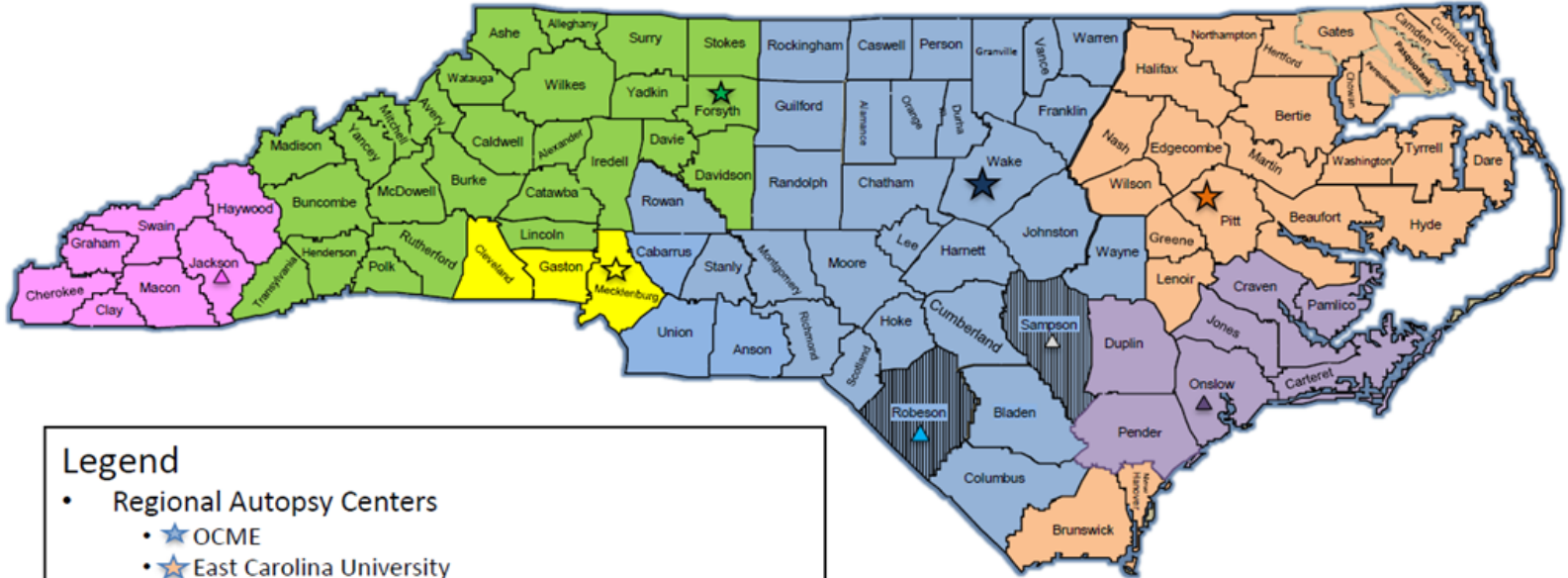
March 12, 2024

The NC Medical Examiner System

Vision: To be the unmatched leader in medicolegal death investigation for the decedents and communities we serve resulting in better health, wellbeing, and safety for all North Carolinians



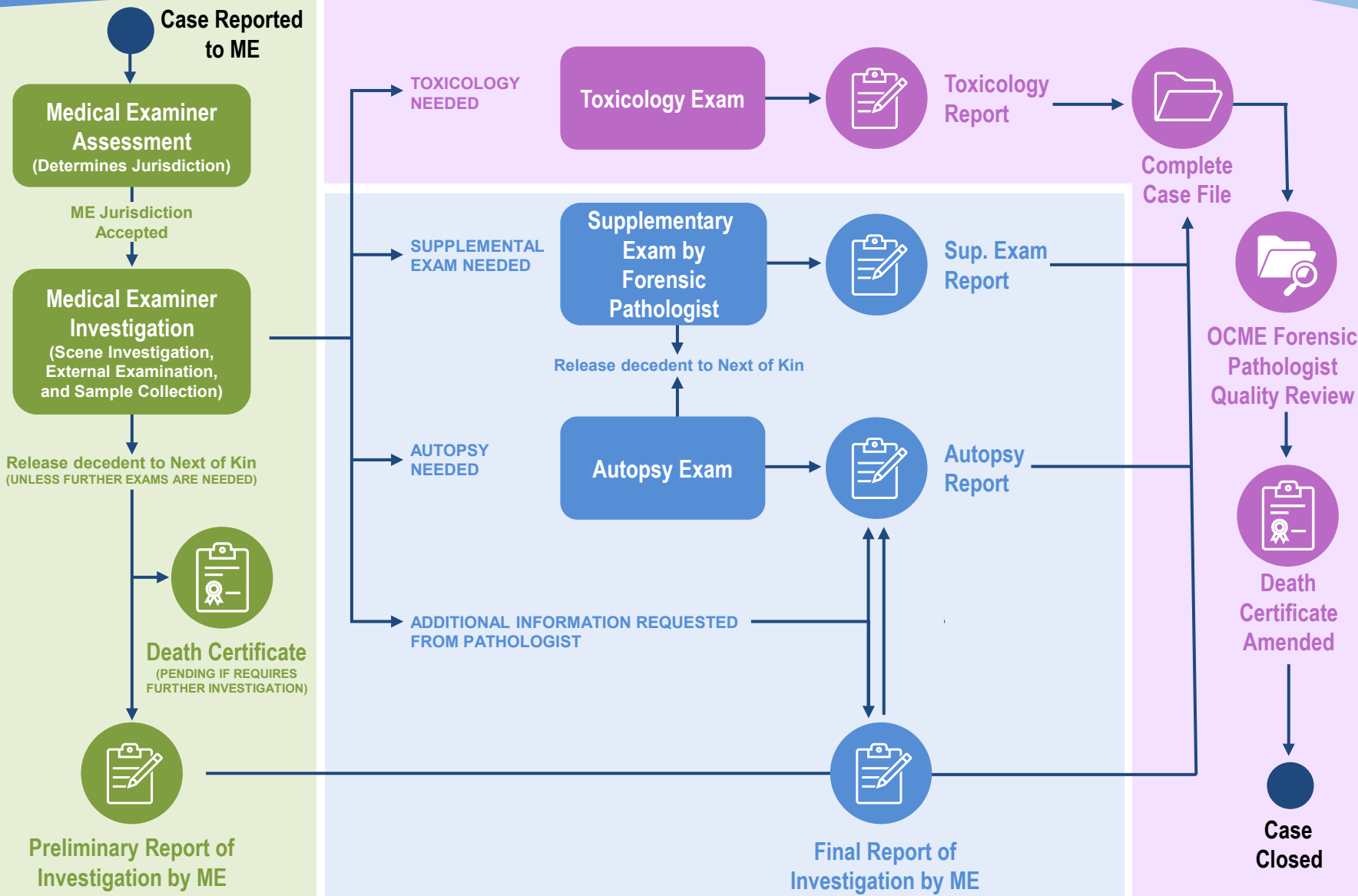
Statewide Infrastructure includes OCME and Regional Facilities



- Legend**
- Regional Autopsy Centers
 - ★ OCME
 - ★ East Carolina University
 - ★ Wake Forest University
 - ★ Mecklenburg Medical Examiner
 - Other Providers
 - ▲ WestCare-Harris Regional Hospital
 - ▲ Southeastern Regional Medical Center
 - ▲ Onslow Memorial Hospital
 - ▲ Sampson Regional Medical Center

- OCME Regions**
- Raleigh (light blue)
 - Charlotte (yellow)
 - Winston Salem (green)
 - Greenville (orange)
 - Jacksonville (purple) (RAC – ECU)
 - Sylva (pink) (RAC – WFB)
 - Service Overlaps with RAC - OCME (striped)

Process for Cases in ME Jurisdiction



COUNTY

AUTOPSY CENTER, RAC, or OCME

OCME

System Workload has Increased

- **2019 = 12,010 cases**
- **2023 = 15,175 cases***

26% increase in caseload

Source: Annual Autopsy Centers Report Session Law 2023-134, Section 9H.8.(g)

** 2023 Data are provisional data and subject to change.*

System Workload is More Complex

Nearly 12 people die from overdose each day in NC

- **Compared to 2016 YTD**
 - 594% increase in fentanyl positive deaths
- **Compared to 2018 YTD**
 - 63% increase in suspected overdose
 - 112% increase in fentanyl positive deaths
- **Comparing January 2023 to January 2024, 391% increase in subpoenas for forensic pathologists, MEs, and toxicologists***

**Anticipate additional drastic increase in subpoenas to coincide with new DA autopsy death by distribution autopsies to have largest impact on testifying 1-2 years after autopsy exams*

A Successful System Requires Central OCME Stability

Currently 45% of staff are time-limited and temporary

- **Temporary staff**

- Must take furloughs
- Do not receive the same level of benefits
- Harder to sustain this model

- **Impact on workflow**

- Slower turnaround times for reports, analysis, access to experts
- Significant delays in completing examinations and decedents stay longer at OCME
- Grieving families, law enforcement, and public do not receive timely responses

Recent Legislative Actions

- **Increased autopsy fee from \$2,800 to \$5,800 to meet the cost of autopsy examinations**
 - Begins July 1, 2024
- **Supported contract autopsy centers**
 - Expansion of existing ECU facility plus a new facility in Union County
- **Funded additional forensic pathologists**
- **Expanded who can be appointed as a local Medical Examiner (ME)**
- **Increased fee for medical transporters**

Other Legislative Actions

- **Implemented new child toxicology testing requirements**
 - Began January 2024
 - New process and additional workload already started
 - Established 2 positions funded by the legislature
- **Death by distribution expanded language**
 - Began December 2023
 - Allocated funds for equipment, supplies, upgrades, advanced training, temporary positions
 - Have seen an increase in autopsy cases
 - No additional positions for increased workload

Legislatively Mandated Strategic Plan

Staffing Needs for NC's Medical Examiner System

Short Term Solutions	Long Term Solutions
Transition temporary/time limited roles to FTE	Support for education, training and outreach to improve future workforce pipeline
Ensure salaries are more competitive	Establish a Quality Assurance and Accountability team
Increase payment for local MEs & provide equipment	

Better Data Collection & Sharing; Improved Communications

Short Term Solutions
Launch new Medical Examiner Information System: streamlined efficiency, paperless workflows, increased case status data availability
Create a call center
Pursue further IT stabilization and automation technologies

Increase Capacity for Autopsies & Exams

Long Term Solutions
Expand OCME facility for examination, toxicology and storage
Two additional autopsy centers under purview of OCME to meet the increasing population and work volume