

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE**  
Inter-Office Communication

Date: 4/24/2026

To: Marcelia Nicholson-Bobell, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Medical Examiner's Office; Wieslawa Tlomak, M.D.; Chief Medical Examiner

Subject: Medical Examiner's Office 2025 Annual Report

File Type: Informational Report

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This informational report provides a report on how Medical Examiner's Office set and achieved its 2025 goals.

**POLICY**

This report aligns to Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health.

Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	<a href="#">Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity &amp; Health</a>
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**ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN**

- 1A: Reflect the full diversity of the County at every level of County government
- 1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government
- 1C: Increase the number of County contracts awarded to minority and women-owned businesses
- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered
- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions
- 3A: Invest "upstream" to address root causes of health disparities
- 3B: Enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

Alignment to the above strategic goals is articulated in responses to the questions below.

## **BODY**

The mission of the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office is to promote and maintain the highest standards in the field of death investigation. To provide a timely, accurate, and legally defensible cause and manner of death. To Enhance public safety through reducing the incidence of preventable deaths. And to protect the interests of deceased individuals and their families, and the community. Our goals align with national standards for forensic death investigation, with a strong emphasis on professionalism, accuracy, and community service.

Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office investigates deaths in Milwaukee County as outlined in Wisconsin State Statutes (979.012). According to the 2020 United States Census, Milwaukee County has a population of 939,489. The racial and ethnic composition is approximately as follows: 55% White, 30% Black or African American, 15% Hispanic and Latino, 4% Asian, less than 1% Native American, and 2% other.

Death investigations in Milwaukee County serve all citizens, including those in historically underserved, marginalized, and/or adversely affected groups. In 2025, 8,472 deaths (90% of the total number of deaths in Milwaukee County) were reported to the Medical Examiner's Office. Forensic pathologists conducted 1,727 autopsies, 125 external exams, and signed 2,177 Death Certificates. The office conducted cremation views and issued 4,002 Cremation Permits.

The Medical Examiner's Office goals in 2025 reflect our Strategic Plan which focuses on improving employee well-being, breaking down Medical Examiner's office silos, and driving upstream investments through data.

- Goal 1: Achieve full accreditation for the Medical Examiner's Office and Toxicology Laboratory
- Goal 2: Create partnership with local epidemiologist
- Goal 3: Maintain competitive compensation for investigative and autopsy staff within 10% of Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office in Minnesota
- Goal 4: Increase the number of employees attending continuous education seminars annually
- Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing departmental sponsored activities with a goal of 6 activities annually

1. What key factors *enabled* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

- **Goal 1: Achieve full accreditation for the Medical Examiner's Office and Toxicology Laboratory**

The biggest factor that enabled our department to accomplish this goal was being fully staffed and the additional positions funded through the Opioid Settlement Fund. The Medical Examiner's Office has been either fully or provisionally accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) for 26 years. The number of autopsies has been significantly increasing since 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic and opioid epidemic. In 2020 and 2021, the NAME, accreditation agency, did not demote offices' full accreditation status to provisional accreditation when doctors

conducted more than 325 autopsies per year, which allowed Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office remain fully accredited, despite higher than allowed by the NAME number of autopsies per doctor per year. At the end of 2022 the NAME policy has changed. Subsequently, in 2023 and 2024 the office full accreditation was demoted to provisional accreditation secondary to increased case load per doctor per year (exceeding 325 autopsies per doctor), which resulted in Phase II deficiency. Even one Phase II violation automatically results in provisional accreditation. Insufficient professional staff resulted in subsequent deficiencies such as increased turnaround times for reports of postmortem examinations.

Hiring forensic pathologists was a complex and challenging process. In many regions in the United States, including Midwest, there is a shortage of forensic pathologists due to the training requirements and the emotionally demanding nature of the job. Many medical students and pathology residents may not pursue this specialty because of the long hours, emotional toll, and relatively lower compensation compared to other medical specialties. Despite difficulties, the Medical Examiner's Office was able to overcome these challenges and hire two forensic pathologists in July 2023.

In addition, using the opioid settlement fund, the office was able to hire another forensic pathologist in July 2024. Hiring three doctors resulted in decreasing the number of autopsies per doctor per year to about 248 (which is the NAME recommended number of autopsies per doctor per year) in 2025 and reducing the turnaround time for completing autopsy reports from 124 days in 2023 to 49 days in 2025. The 2025 Annual Accreditation Report was submitted and on March 13<sup>th</sup> our office was approved for Continued Full Accreditation.

Under new leadership, the Medical Examiner's Office Toxicology Laboratory underwent on site accreditation visit by the ANSI National Accreditation Board (ANAB) in September 2024. In December of 2024, the laboratory fulfilled the accreditation requirements of ISO/IEC 17025 for Forensic Testing and Calibration in the field of Forensic Testing. The laboratory is ISO (International Organization for Standardization) accredited until January 31, 2029. In order to maintain this certification, the laboratory will undergo annual reviews. This review was done in 2025 and the lab remains fully accredited.

- **Goal 2: Create partnership with local epidemiologist**

In 2025, the Medical Examiner's Office did not establish partnership with an epidemiologist. However, the office collaborates with the Medical College of Wisconsin's (MCW) Comprehensive Injury Center (CIC) and Overdose Public Health Safety Team (OD-PHAST). Forensic pathologists participate in the State and County Death Review teams such as State Pediatric Death Review, Milwaukee County Pediatric Death Review, Suicide Death Review, Overdose Fatality Review, etc.

The Medical Examiner's Office has been providing fatality data for Milwaukee County Motor Vehicle Crash Dashboard and Opioid Overdose Dashboard. The Motor Vehicle Crash Dashboard went live in March 2024 and the Opioid Overdose Dashboard went live in February 2025. The office Annual Report containing mortality data is published on the Medical Examiner's website and is available to the public.

- **Goal 3: Maintain competitive compensation for investigative and autopsy staff within 10% of Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office in Minnesota.**

Compensation for Medical Examiner's Office employees has been reviewed as part of the Milwaukee County compensation transformation project. The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office is unique in Wisconsin due to the high number of reportable deaths, as well as the volume and complexity of cases requiring autopsies, including a significant number of homicides, motor vehicle accidents, and drug overdoses. Based on data from the National Association of Medical Examiners, the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office in Minnesota serves a similar population and handles a comparable case mix. As both jurisdictions are located in the Midwest, cost of living considerations are also comparable.

As a result of the compensation transformation project, combined with proactive decisions by department leadership, the Medical Examiner's Office successfully achieved its target benchmark in 2025 of maintaining compensation within 10% of Hennepin County. Compensation for investigative and autopsy staff was reviewed by project consultants, resulting in several employee groups being placed into new pay grades. Additionally, the 2024 Medical Examiner's budget supported targeted increases for medicolegal death investigators with five or more years of service, while forensic autopsy technicians and newly hired investigators also received compensation adjustments through the County's broader compensation initiative.

- **Goal 4: Increase the number of employees attending continuous education seminars annually**

In 2025, the Medical Examiner's Office continued to prioritize professional development, with 16 of 37 staff members participating in continuing education opportunities. This included 4 Forensic Pathologists, 4 Medicolegal Death Investigators, and 6 Forensic Chemists, reflecting a strong, cross-functional commitment to maintaining and enhancing professional expertise.

The office supports ongoing learning through monthly in-service lectures held on the third Thursday of each month, offered both in person and via Microsoft Teams to ensure accessibility for all shifts. These sessions feature a range of topics in medicolegal death investigation and are led by internal staff as well as invited subject matter experts.

In addition to internal training, staff actively participated in external professional development. Forensic pathologists attended national conferences hosted by organizations such as the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and the National Association of Medical Examiners. Medicolegal Death Investigators participated in semiannual meetings of the Wisconsin Association of Medical Examiners and Coroners. Toxicology laboratory staff engaged in ongoing education through the Midwest Toxicology Collaborative Grand Rounds and attended national conferences to stay current with emerging trends and technologies in forensic toxicology.

- **Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing departmental sponsored activities with a goal of 6 activities annually**

In 2025, the Medical Examiner’s Office continued to prioritize a positive workplace culture built on trust, communication, and mutual respect. The department successfully met its goal by hosting a variety of staff engagement activities, including holiday parties, office luncheons, and themed pot-luck events, which saw strong participation across all teams. These gatherings provided consistent opportunities for staff to connect outside of daily operations and strengthen internal relationships.

2. What key factors *hindered* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

- **Goal 1: Achieve full accreditation for the Medical Examiner’s Office and Toxicology Laboratory**

There were no significant factors that hindered progress toward this goal in 2025. The office successfully addressed prior staffing and workload challenges, resulting in the achievement of full accreditation.

- **Goal 2: Create partnership with local epidemiologist**

While meaningful progress was made in 2025, a formalized partnership with a local epidemiologist was not fully established. Initial collaboration efforts, including engagement with partners at the Medical College of Wisconsin and participation in OD-PHAST and other review teams, provided a strong foundation. However, competing priorities, coordination across agencies, and the time required to formalize data-sharing and analytical frameworks slowed full implementation.

- **Goal 3: Maintain competitive compensation for investigative and autopsy staff within 10% of Hennepin County Medical Examiner’s Office in Minnesota**

Although the department achieved its overall compensation benchmark in 2025, challenges remain in sustaining long-term competitiveness, especially since 4 of our current positions are funded by grants and opioid funding. Budgetary constraints and broader market competition continue to create retention pressures, especially for experienced, certified investigators and forensic pathologists. Ongoing monitoring and adjustments will be necessary to maintain alignment with peer jurisdictions.

- **Goal 4: Increase the number of employees attending continuous education seminars annually**

No significant barriers impacted progress toward this goal. The primary challenges remain fiscal constraints and balancing operational demands with time away for training; however, the use of virtual learning and flexible training opportunities helped mitigate these impacts.

- **Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing departmental sponsored activities with a goal of 6 activities annually**

No significant factors hindered progress toward this goal in 2025. The

department successfully implemented a variety of activities, with strong staff participation. Minor scheduling and operational constraints were managed effectively without impacting overall success.

3. If any goals are changing, please list your Department/Office goals for 2025. (Please put "N/A" if your goals will remain the same.)

**N/A**

**FISCAL EFFECT**

The report is informational only and there is no fiscal impact.

**VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES**

**PREPARED BY:**

Medical Examiner's Office; Wieslawa Tlomak, M.D.; Chief Medical Examiner

**APPROVED BY:**

Medical Examiner's Office; Wieslawa Tlomak, M.D.; Chief Medical Examiner

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Medical Examiner's Office Scorecard

cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors  
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk