

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: 4/14/2025

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

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

Subject: Medical Examiner's Office 2024 Annual Report0

File Type: Informational Report

This informational report provides a report on how Medical Examiner's Office set and achieved its 2024 goals.

POLICY

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

Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health
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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

1. Please submit your Scorecard Report along with this report, to show progress on your Department/Office's top goals in 2024. If you would like to add any additional information about the extent to which you accomplished your goals, please do so here.

The goals of Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office align with national standards for forensic death investigation, with a strong emphasis on professionalism, accuracy, and community service. The core goals include: investigation of suspicious, unexplained and violent deaths to determine the cause and manner of death; identifying patterns in deaths such as infectious diseases or drug overdoses to inform public health initiatives and reduce preventable deaths; providing expert testimony and forensic evidence to assist in criminal investigations and legal proceedings; and protecting the interest of deceased individuals and their families.

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 2024, 7,850 deaths (83% of the total number of deaths in Milwaukee County) were reported to the Medical Examiner's Office. Forensic pathologists conducted 1,698 autopsies, 130 external exams, and signed 2,174 Death Certificates. The office conducted cremation views and issued 3,547 Cremation Permits.

The Medical Examiner's Office goals in 2024 continued to be focus on staffing, balancing operational needs, accreditation requirements, case load and community service expectations.

- 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: Prioritize continuing education for four employees annually
- Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing office luncheons and outside work activities with a goal of at least two outside work activities annually

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

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

Medical Examiner's Office has been either fully or provisionally accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) for 25 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 250 (which is the NAME recommended number of autopsies per doctor per year) in 2024 and reducing the turnaround time for completing autopsy reports from 124 days in 2023 to 51 days in 2024. The 2024 Annual Accreditation Report was submitted for review to the National Association of Medical Examiners on March 28, 2025 and currently, the office is waiting for the NAME decision regarding accreditation status.

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.

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

In 2024, 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 Milwaukee County compensation transformation project. Milwaukee County

Medical Examiner's Office is unique in Wisconsin due to high number of reportable deaths as well as the number and type of cases requiring autopsies including a high number of homicides, motor vehicle accidents and drug overdoses. Based on the National Association of Medical Examiners' data, the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office in Minnesota serves similar population and has similar spectrum of cases. Thus, the two offices are comparable and since both are located in Midwest, the costs of living are comparable as well.

Compensations for investigative and autopsy staff were reviewed by compensation transformation project consultants and some employees' groups were placed in a new pay grade. The 2024 Medical Examiner's budget allowed compensation increase for medicolegal death investigators who have been working in the office for 5 years or more. Forensic autopsy technicians and newly hired medicolegal death investigators received compensation increases through the County compensation project.

- **Goal 4: Prioritize continuing education for four employees annually**

The Medical Examiner's Office leadership emphasizes the importance of continuous education.

Monthly in-service lectures are scheduled for every third Thursday of the month at 8:00 am. The in-service is offered in person and via Teams. Virtual lectures allow the second and third shift to participate from home. Different topics in medicolegal death investigation are presented by the Medical Examiner's Office employees as well as by invited speakers. All employees are encouraged to attend the lectures. In 2024, attendance has averaged approximately 98 percent.

The office organized the 30th Annual Regional Forensic Science Seminar in Milwaukee on November 6-7, 2024. The seminar topics covered different aspects of medicolegal death investigation including prosecution of cold cases, case studies, and working with other agencies. 105 people attended the seminar which was free for our office staff.

Forensic pathologists are encouraged to attend annual meetings of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and National Association of Medical Examiners. The National Association of Medical Examiners offered a hybrid meeting in 2024. Three doctors attended the virtual meeting.

Medicolegal Death Investigators attended the semiannual meetings of the Wisconsin Association of Medical Examiners and Coroners.

Toxicology laboratory staff attends monthly Midwest Toxicology Collaborative Grand Rounds at Medical College of Wisconsin. The chemists attended Toxicology Conference in Kansas City, Missouri last year.

- **Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing office luncheons and outside work activities with a goal of at least two outside work activities annually**

Promoting a positive working relationship at the Medical Examiner's Office is about

trust, communication, and mutual respect. Staff gatherings involving themed “pot-luck” lunches have been a big success in 2024 with approximately 75 percent of employees participating. The ME staff participated in Cream Puff 5K and attended a Milwaukee Milkmen baseball game.

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

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

The 2024 National Association of Medical Examiners annual accreditation review is pending.

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

Dr. Tlomak initiated conversation with Dr. Kostelac, Assistant Professor at the Division of Epidemiology at the Medical College of Wisconsin, regarding collaboration with the Medical Examiner’s Office in February of 2025. Dr. Kostelac is a member of OD-PHAST team and is very interested in working with the Medical Examiner’s Office and provide mortality data analysis.

Using data from the Medical Examiner’s Office is important for understanding patterns of death, public health trends, and emerging threats such as fatal drug overdoses. Utilizing Medical Examiner’s (ME) data of fatal overdoses is a crucial resource for public health, research, and policy-related initiatives to combat the opioid epidemic. Working with Dr. Kostelac will help identify trends in overdose deaths, including shifts in the drugs involved, demographics of those affected, and geographic locations with higher mortality rates. In addition, data can be analyzed to identify common characteristics among individuals who die of fatal overdoses, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and co-existing health conditions (e.g., mental health issues, substance use disorders). Toxicology data can be used to monitor the emergence of new synthetic drugs or dangerous combinations of substances and provide crucial insights into opioid use trends and patterns. Compiling these data and sharing it with the public can raise awareness about the overdose crisis, debunk stigmas associated with addiction, and promote support for harm reduction and recovery services.

Working with Dr. Kostelac will allow the office to include more detailed mortality data in the office’s annual report. These data can be used for epidemiological analysis, risk factors identification, informing interventions, and guiding public health initiatives aimed at prevention of deaths due to natural and non-natural causes.

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

Medicolegal death investigators pay grade was changed in 2024 as a part of the County’s compensation transformation project. As a result, the compensation range is compatible with the Hennepin Office, however our investigators’ compensation is still not within 10% of Hennepin County Medical Examiner’s Office. The Medical Examiner’s Office has more flexibility to increase compensation for investigators, but our annual budget does not allow compensation increases to meet this goal. Unfortunately, it creates problems with retention of investigators. In the last few years, 50% of experienced investigators, all certified by the American Board of

Medicolegal Death Investigations (ABDMI), left Milwaukee office for medical examiner's/coroner's offices in Wisconsin that are less busy and offer better compensation. Currently, seven (7) of fifteen (15) investigators have been working in the office for more than 5 years. The remaining have been employed for less than 2 years and only four (4) were eligible and became ABDMI certified in 2024.

- **Goal 4: Prioritize continuing education for four employees annually**
The Medical Examiner's Office staff was able to participate in continuous education.
- **Goal 5: Promote positive working relationships by increasing office luncheons and outside work activities with a goal of at least two outside work activities annually**
The Medical Examiner's Office staff participated in at work and outside work activities.

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

In addition to the previous year goals, the goals in 2025 include:

- Hiring a new Operations Manager
- Working with Milwaukee County Department of Administrative Services-IMSD team and Constanza Mateus, IT Project Manager on the new management software for the Medical Examiner's Office (Forensic Advantage for medicolegal death investigation and Clinisys for toxicology laboratory). The software is expected to go live in November 2025.
- Working with CD Smith Construction on the new facility and participating in on site visits.
- Working with the CGL Companies' Transition and Activation Planning team to prepare the Medical Examiner's Office and Toxicology Laboratory to move to the new facility in the spring/summer of 2025.

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