

# ASD HIGHLIGHTS

## Why We Did This Audit

At the direction of the Milwaukee County Comptroller in response to a request from the Chairman of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, the Audit Services Division (ASD) conducted an audit of the autopsy workload from 2013 to 2018 at the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office. We looked at the impact the opioid crisis has had upon the workload along with the performance of autopsies for referral counties. The Chairman expressed an interest in additional information, including autopsy fees, to assist policymakers to "determine if it is in the best interest of our residents to provide these services outside of Milwaukee County."

## What We Recommended

ASD made 7 recommendations that, if implemented, will improve the autopsy operation at the Medical Examiner's Office. The Medical Examiner's Office accepted all of our recommendations. Key recommendations include:

- Present to policymakers a revised mission statement that includes guidance on the magnitude of referral autopsies to be performed by the Medical Examiner's Office.
- Present to the County Board a plan to help ensure that the office will not exceed the parameters established under NAME standards.
- Use the Employee Engagement data in an attempt to assess if any segment of employees are more affected by the increase in autopsies.
- Immediately execute contracts or other formal agreements such as letters of engagement with any outside entity for which they are performing autopsy services, brain or other organ extractions or other professional services.
- Conduct an analysis to determine the approximate cost to conduct an autopsy and seek County Board approval of the fee.
- Pursue the following items:
  - a) Create a check monitoring system to track payments for services provided including creating an electronic record of all invoices and payments received and creating a numbering system for invoices.
  - b) Seek to recoup any owed funds.
  - c) Include identifying information in the County's general ledger system when depositing payments from referral counties.
  - d) Immediately request inclusion of an invoice function in the new ERP system for autopsies.
- Work with the Department of Administrative Services to repair portions of the facility.

For more information on this or any of our reports visit <http://county.milwaukee.gov/Audit>

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**Milwaukee County autopsies have increased 7.8% since 2013, autopsies for referral counties increased 111.7%. A lack of contracts for most of the referral counties is a concern.**

## BACKGROUND

The Medical Examiner's Office is charged with investigating and determining the cause, circumstances and manner in each case of sudden, unexpected or unusual death that occurs within Milwaukee County. In addition to Milwaukee County autopsy work, the Medical Examiner's Office provides autopsies and organ extraction services to other Wisconsin counties for a fee. Other functions of the office include detecting infectious disease to assist in the prevention of the spread of communicable disease, issuing death certificates, conducting cremation investigations and maintaining a forensic toxicology laboratory.

## OVERALL OBJECTIVE

The objective of the audit was to review the autopsy workload of the Medical Examiner's Office to assist policymakers in determining if it is in the best interest of Milwaukee County to be providing autopsy services outside of Milwaukee County. We did this by reviewing the increase in drug related deaths since 2013 along with the amount of referral autopsies from 2013 to 2018. We also reviewed the administrative function as it relates to the provision of referral autopsies.

## WHAT WE FOUND

- Drug related deaths have increased since 2013 but the number and type of drugs found in decedents has seen a more dramatic increase which results in a growing need for toxicology work.
- Milwaukee County autopsies have increased 7.8% since 2013 while autopsies for referral counties increased 111.7%, as shown in the chart below. Total annual autopsies performed by the Medical Examiner's Office increased by 437 since 2013. Of that increase, 361 were for referral counties and 76 were for Milwaukee County. In 2013, the Medical Examiner's Office performed 323 autopsies for six referral counties. In 2018, it performed 684 autopsies for 14 referral counties.
- In total, from 2013 to 2018 Milwaukee County deposited \$3.3 million in revenue from referral counties for autopsy services only.
- The Medical Examiner's Office averaged 264 autopsies per full time pathologist for 2013 to 2018 which is in excess of the National Association of Medical Examiners recommended maximum of 250.
- In total from 2013 to 2018 the Medical Examiner provided 941 autopsies to referral counties without a contract.
- We found the amount charged to referral counties to be reasonably related to costs, if not too low.
- The 2019 Capital Improvements Budget includes funding for a new facility, however, existing building issues should not be allowed to linger.

**Autopsy Levels from 2013 to 2018**

