



**The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Office of the Chief Medical Examiner**



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The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02113

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means
State House, Room 243
Boston, MA 02113

Dear Chairpersons:

Pursuant to the FY 22 General Appropriation Act, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is required to submit to the House and Senate Committee on Ways and Means a report, no later than January 14, 2022, detailing: (a) the current caseload of the office and each of its medical examiners and the caseload for fiscal year 2021; (b) the number of procedures performed in fiscal year 2021; (c) the current turnaround time and backlogs; (d) the current response time to scenes; (e) the number of cases completed in fiscal year 2021; (f) the current status of accreditation with the National Association of Medical Examiners; (g) progress in identification and completion of reports; and (h) progress in improving delays in decedent release.

Overview

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) was established through Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 38 to deliver, under the supervision and control of the chief medical examiner, a comprehensive system of medicolegal investigative services to the citizens of the Commonwealth. The OCME works in collaboration with District Attorneys, the Attorney General, Courts, funeral homes, hospitals, academic centers, insurance companies, organ procurement organizations, fire departments, and local and state police as well as supporting families and friends of decedents.

OCME Facilities

The OCME is comprised of four offices and employs 122.5 employees representing multiple disciplines; medical examiners (forensic pathologists); a forensic anthropologist and a forensic odontologist; medical examiner assistants; intake specialists; administrative support for medical examiners; medicolegal investigators; cremation specialists; accountants; and managers.

The OCME Headquarters is in Boston and operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Twelve full-time medical examiners, including the Chief and Deputy Chief Medical Examiners, one part-time medical examiner, and one forensic pathology fellow are assigned to the Boston office. There are three regional offices located in Westfield, Worcester, and Sandwich. The Westfield office operates two shifts, seven days per week and is staffed with four full-time medical examiners. The Worcester office is located at UMass Memorial Hospital in a space that is shared with the Hospital's pathology department. Normally, this office operates one shift, three days per week, and is staffed with one contract medical examiner. To minimize potential COVID-19 transmission within this shared medical facility, examination and administrative operations were temporarily suspended in the Worcester office in July 2020 and are anticipated to restart when safety allows. The contract medical examiner was reassigned to the Westfield office to assist with the examination of Worcester cases that are now transported to the Westfield office for examination. The Sandwich office operates seven days per week for mostly two shifts. In April 2021, the two medical examiners who staff this office provided notice of their resignation, effective July 31, 2021. Since then, three medical examiners from the Boston and Westfield offices have been providing autopsy services in the Sandwich office along with a contract medical examiner. A full-time medical examiner was recruited for the Sandwich office and she began her employment on September 1, 2021.

Case Statistics

The OCME's mission is to determine cause and manner of death for deaths that occur in Massachusetts under violent, suspicious, or unexplained circumstances and to release work products, namely certifications of death and autopsy reports, in a timely fashion. The OCME relies upon forensic pathologists and medical examiners assistants to meet this mission, along with additional support from medicolegal investigators, as well as administrative, fiscal, legal, and managerial staff.

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 38, Section 3 lists the deaths that must be reported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Based on the circumstances of the death, the medical examiner will either accept or decline jurisdiction. Table 1 shows the reporting statistics for the past three fiscal years.

Table 1
Reporting Statistics¹

	Number of Cases Reported to the OCME	Number of Cases Accepted	Number of Cases Declined
FY 19	16,023	7,020	9,003
FY 20	17,584	7,515 ²	10,069
FY 21	18,366	7,947	10,419

¹ The data reports that support Table 1 and all subsequent tables are generated from the OCME Case Management and Tracking System (CMTS) (Conduent Software) using Adapt Analytics Platform and Microsoft Excel 2010. There are limitations to the capabilities of these software platforms and extensive manual rectification of the data is necessary in order to provide meaningful statistical workload reports. It is usual and expected given the methodology of this process that insignificant calculation errors may be present; these should not be considered erroneous but rather within an unknown but small margin of error.

² Six of the accepted cases were recorded as "Surge" cases pursuant to the OCME's COVID-19 response. Surge cases that were accepted by the OCME were not for the purpose of determining cause and manner of death, but rather in order to provide short term storage.

Number Procedures Performed in Fiscal Year 2021

Table 2 reports all the procedures for the past three fiscal years.

Table 2
Number of Procedures Performed

Fiscal Year	Autopsy	External Examinations	District Medical Examiners Views	Bones/Tissues	Chart Reviews	Total Accepted Cases	Cremation Views
FY 19	1927	4083	649	105	256	7020	29,853
FY 20	1947	4522	234	135	671	7509 ³	34,521
FY 21	2177	4263	229	108	1170	7947	34,488

In addition to the autopsies and external examinations, staff medical examiners perform chart reviews on cases identified during a cremation authorization view where the cause and manner of death are not properly certified, cases where the body is no longer available, or cases where the decedent's cause and manner of death is obvious from inspection of medical and other records and no further information would be obtained by transporting the body to the OCME. In cases where a decedent's body is available and a chart review is acceptable for determining cause and manner of death, OCME investigators will examine and photograph the decedent for inspection by the assigned medical examiner. All pertinent medical documentation is obtained and reviewed by a medical examiner. The death certificate is then amended with the proper cause and manner of death.

District Medical Examiner (DME) Views are performed by physicians on contract, whose medical training is something other than forensic pathology. DMEs perform views in hospitals and funeral homes to certify the cause and manner of death when the death was not the result of foul play and the cause and manner is apparent from the circumstances of the death and available medical history. Historically, DMEs have played an important role in OCME operations, and their contributions have allowed the OCME and decedents' legal next of kin to avoid the costs associated with transporting the decedent to and from the OCME when an examination by a forensic pathologist is not necessary. The number of DMEs have been steadily declining over the years with only four DMEs remaining statewide, two assigned for cases in the Boston catchment area and two active for deaths on the islands. However, case assignments to DMEs have also declined with much of the work being supplanted by OCME staff and contract medical examiners performing chart reviews and external examinations. As a result, those deaths which cannot be assigned to a DME are now assigned to medical examiners as chart reviews (typically after documentation by photograph by an OCME staff medicolegal investigator or cremation review specialist) and in-house external examinations.

Discovered bones are reported to the OCME and brought in for examination by a medical examiner or the forensic anthropologist. Cremation views are performed by medical examiners, DMEs, cremation specialists, or forensic investigators on bodies intended for cremation or burial at sea in accordance with M.G.L. c. 38 § 14 to determine that no further examination or inquiry into the death is required.

Postmortem Toxicology

Postmortem toxicology testing is an integral component of medicolegal death investigations and since July 2013, the analysis has been performed by the Massachusetts State Police Crime Laboratory. Table 3 shows the

³ The six surge cases were not included in this number.

postmortem toxicology analysis for FY 21. The average turnaround time (TAT) for toxicology analysis in FY 21 was 31.9 days.

Table 3
Toxicology Analysis

Month	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
# of Cases Completed	539	551	476	553	448	424	383	553	585	515	455	448
# of Cases Assigned	565	498	501	501	484	550	488	487	614	527	456	550
# of Cases Pending	487	432	461	403	437	557	661	591	614	624	622	682
Average TAT	27	26	29	28	25	29	39	37	33	34	38	38

Medical Examiners' Caseload

Table 4 reports the medical examiners' caseloads for the past three fiscal years.

Table 4
Medical Examiners' Caseload for FY 19 -FY 21

	Autopsy	External Examinations	Chart Reviews	Total
Caseload for FY 19	1927	4083	256	6266
Caseload for FY 20	1947	4522	671	7140
Caseload for FY 21	2177	4263	1170	7,610

Current Caseload by Medical Examiner

Table 5 reports each medical examiner's caseload utilizing data from the first two quarters of FY 22.

Table 5: Current Caseload by Medical Examiner (July 1, 2021 through December 25, 2021)

Medical Examiner	Autopsy	External Examinations	Chart Reviews	Total Number of Cases (Autopsy + External Examinations + Chart Reviews)
Dr. Atkinson (Deputy Chief)	52	131	15	198
Dr. Cannon (FT)	31	137	7	175
Dr. Capó-Martinez (FT)	48	133	20	201
Dr. Dedrick (FT)	23	160	183	366
Dr. Elin (FT)	67	142	30	239
Dr. Evans (Contract .5FTE)	15	111	24	150
Dr. Grivetti (FT)	66	83	13	162
Dr. Matthews (FT)	62	198	23	283

Table 5 Cont'd: Current Caseload by Medical Examiner (July 1, 2021 through December 25, 2021)

Medical Examiner	Autopsy	External Examinations	Chart Reviews	Total Number of Cases (Autopsy + External Examinations + Chart Reviews)
Dr. Mourtzinis (FT) ⁴	58	60	11	129
Dr. Perry (FT)	60	127	33	220
Dr. Sandler (.5 FTE)	30	99	6	135
Dr. Scordi-Bello (FT)	104	182	17	303
Dr. Shah (FT)	49	270	26	345
Dr. Stanley (FT)	54	119	31	204
Dr. Springer (FT)	51	84	16	151
Dr. Stonebridge (FT) ⁵	2	3	0	5
Dr. Vidal (FP Fellow)	64	2	2	68
Dr. Welton (FT)	68	138	33	239
Dr. Yakubu-Owolewa (FT)	54	117	19	119
Dr. Zane (Contract .5FTE)	0	0	148	148
Total	958	2296	657	3911

Number of Cases Completed in FY 21, Current Turnaround Time, and Backlog Cases

OCME has been working to enhance improve turnaround times for new cases. Strategies to improve turnaround time include an improved case assignment system, the development of a new autopsy report format, more rapid acquisition of case specific information, and an administrative assistant-medical examiner partnership approach to weekly monitoring of turnaround time for the completion of autopsy reports and death certificates. Concurrently, a refined approach to OCME caseload data led to the development of monthly workload and turnaround time tracking by the Chief Medical Examiner. These efforts continue to be successful in maintaining the NAME metric requiring 90% of autopsy reports be completed within 90 days of the postmortem examination. From July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 (representing work initially assigned from May 1, 2020 to April 30, 2021), twenty medical examiners completed 5093 external examinations and chart reviews within 94 days (97.9%) and 1879 autopsy reports (90.5%) in 94 days.⁶

Upon taking office in 2017, current OCME leadership inherited a backlog of 1,612 cases in which an autopsy or examination had been performed but the autopsy report and/or death certificate was not yet complete. Since that time, the OCME has completed the work product associated with more than 70% of these cases, reducing the number of unfinished cases to 419 as of this writing. Furthermore, as of this writing, 99.4% of the 7,610 cases examined by staff and contract medical examiners from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 (representing work initially assigned from May 1, 2020 to April 30, 2021), have been completed, thus largely avoiding any contribution to an ongoing backlog. With the OCME backlog now stabilized, the residual historic backlogged cases are currently finalized as the medical examiners are able to with priority given to requested documents.

⁴ Hired September 1, 2021.

⁵ As the Director of Neuropathology and Cardiac Pathology Services, Dr. Stonebridge specializes in performing examinations of the brain and heart with limited rotation on autopsy service.

⁶ The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) sets the standard and is a major accrediting body for medical examiners' offices throughout the country. As reported to NAME in the past years, the OCME allows a four-day procedural window to account for administrative processing of reports.

NAME Accreditation

The OCME was granted full accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) on July 29, 2018 (effective, December 16, 2017 to December 16, 2021). Accredited offices are required to undergo an on-site inspection every four years as part of the accreditation renewal process. The OCME's required inspection took place on November 9, 2021 and the OCME was granted Full Accreditation, effective December 16, 2021 to December 16, 2025.

Current Response Time to Scenes

Current response time was determined by analyzing the OCME's Medical Examiner Assistants (MEAs) response to scenes for a four-week period from November 28, 2021 through December 25, 2021. Deaths that occurred in a medical facility were not considered as scene responses and were excluded from this analysis. The average time from departure from the OCME to arrival at the scene was forty-two minutes, which is a slight decrease from last year's response time of forty-five minutes.

Progress in Identification and Improving Delays in Decedent Release

The majority of decedents are examined within 24 hours of their arrival at the OCME. Many are examined the same day. The time between arrival at the OCME and examination rarely exceeds 48 hours. The death is certified when the examination has been completed with most decedents being ready for release the same day. Delays in release can occur when the decedent has to be identified at the OCME. Identifications at the OCME are necessary: when visual identification is not appropriate due to trauma or decomposition; when the death is believed to be a homicide; when the death occurred while in police custody or in a jail or correctional facility; or when the decedent was reported as unknown or is unclaimed. The turnaround time for the completion of the identification can be as quick as a day when the decedent is visually identifiable or when dental records are available, but may take months when DNA analysis is the only option. In FY 21, of the 6,440 decedents transported to the OCME for examination, only three were released unidentified.

Delays can also occur for unclaimed or unidentified decedents who are awaiting burial through the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), in accordance with M.G.L. c. 38, § 13. Since January 2016, the OCME has been able to expedite the release of decedents to DTA for burial through an incentive program, improving release time from the OCME, but at a financial cost. This program pays \$1,000, in addition to the DTA-provided stipend, to funeral directors who accept a DTA case for burial, provided the funeral director picks up the decedent within two weeks of being assigned the case by DTA. In FY21, the OCME's incentive program expedited the release of 148 decedents to DTA for burial, at a cost of \$148,000 to the OCME.

Initiatives and Accomplishments

Since October 2017, accomplishments have been achieved and significant improvements realized in the delivery of medicolegal investigative services to the citizens of Massachusetts. Most notable was the achievement of Full NAME Accreditation on July 29, 2018 and the maintenance of that accreditation since then. The COVID-19 pandemic posed unique challenges, but the development and implementation of a COVID-19 Response Plan in 2020 has ensured the continued delivery of essential medicolegal services while protecting the health and safety of staff during the initial surge and the variants that have followed. Accomplishments achieved in FY 21 include the following:

- Improved staff safety and enhanced OCME's preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the following initiatives that were funded by a grant award from the Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Funding Program: 1. Purchased materials to clean and disinfect offices and decedent transportation vehicles; 2. Reconfigured the Intake and Records Department to allow for proper social distancing; 3. Purchased a trailer to stock PPE and equipment which can easily be transported to other offices as needed; 3. Purchased a heavy duty storage system for histology blocks and slides.
- Installed perimeter fencing at the Sandwich office to improve security and enhance the safety of staff, especially those who work the evening and overnight shifts.
- Painted and installed new carpeting in the common administrative office space in the Boston Headquarters.
- Updated the condensing unit in the auxiliary cooler in Boston Headquarters.
- Purchased six decedent transportation vehicles to replace six aging vehicles.
- Expanded the high-density storage capacity in the mortuary.

Concluding Comments

Providing timely information to suit the needs of the citizens of the Commonwealth has been the priority of the current administrative team of the OCME since October 2017. Since then, significant improvements have been made to the delivery of medicolegal investigation services to the Commonwealth. We have achieved the goal of completing 90% of the death certificates and autopsy reports in 90 days and we continue to meet this metric since being granted full accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners on July 29, 2018. As Massachusetts, and the entire country, faces the uncertain impact of the current COVID-19 variant, the priority remains to protect the health and safety of OCME employees while continuing to provide essential medicolegal investigative services to citizens of Massachusetts.

Please contact me if you have any questions concerning the information contained in this report or require additional information.

Sincerely,



Mindy J. Hull, MD
Chief Medical Examiner

cc: Terrence Reidy, Secretary, Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Kerry Collins, Undersecretary for Forensic Science and Technology