

Issue Brief – Medical Examiner - Caseload

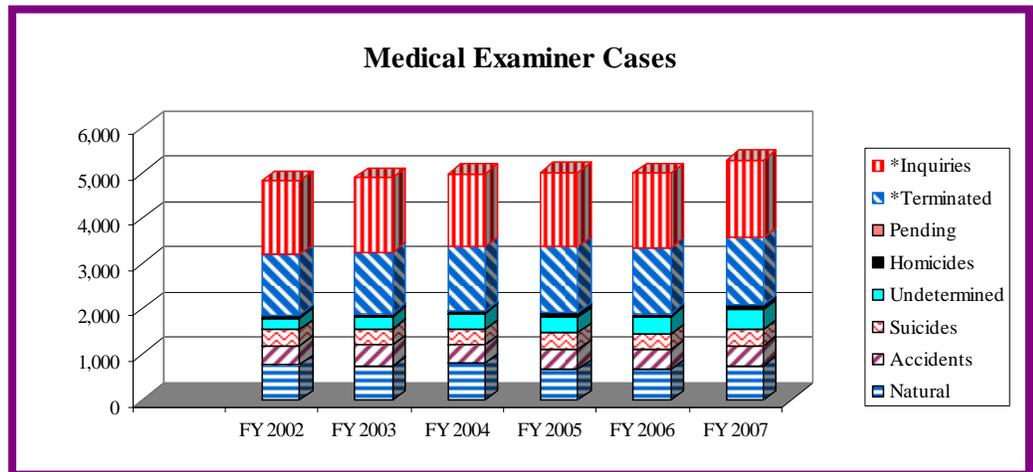
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DOH-09-07

SUMMARY

The Office of the Medical Examiner (OME) has been working at caseloads at or above what is considered a national accreditation violation since FY 2003. Caseloads have increased 9.3% since FY 2007 with no increase in pathologist staff. FY 2008 year-to-date caseloads through November are 8% above the same period last year. The Analyst recommends \$160,000 ongoing General Fund to hire a new pathologist to help address caseloads.

The OME is responsible for the investigation and certification of any sudden and/or unexpected death, which occurs within the State of Utah. The OME is involved to a varying degree in approximately 25 percent of the deaths in Utah each year. The Office of the Medical Examiner provides information and expertise to health care providers, EMTs, law enforcement officials, the courts and attorneys concerning issues relating to death and injury within Utah.



Over the past five years, the total number of cases handled by the Medical Examiner has grown from 4,834 (FY 2002) to 5,283 (FY 2007), an increase of 9.3%. The Inquiries and Terminated Cases are not examined by the Medical Examiner’s Office but they are processed and investigated. The last five years’ activities are detailed above.

OBJECTIVE

By funding new staff to reduce caseloads, this will allow more resources to perform investigations.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The work of the Office of the Medical Examiner establishes the cause of the death as well as contributes to evidence provided in criminal investigations. As caseloads increase, resources are stretched and the time available to do each investigation may be reduced, potentially affecting the quality of results.

Last year this line item received \$270,000 ongoing General Fund and \$112,000 supplemental one-time General Fund for program and caseload growth in the Office of the Medical Examiner. Monies were used to help retain contracted employees doing field work by raising reimbursement rates. An autopsy assistant was also hired. The agency indicates that the increases were insufficient to lower caseloads and cover inflationary costs in recent years.

<u>Medical Examiner</u>	<u>FY 2007 Caseload</u>	<u>With New FTE</u>
Director	388	291
Assistant Director	382	287
Pathologist 1	387	290
Pathologist 2	433	325
New Pathologist		396
Average Caseload	397	318

The National Association of Medical Examiners recommends an annual investigation caseload of 250 per pathologist. Organizations having employees with caseloads above 325 per year are considered to have a major violation in the consideration for national accreditation of the office. The OME has been operating with

caseloads at 325 or more per pathologist since FY 2003. In FY 2007, average caseloads were 397, 22% above violation levels and 59% above recommended caseloads. Funding a new pathologist would bring average caseloads to 318 for FY 2007 totals, as illustrated by the table on the previous page.

According to Dr. Garry Peterson, Chairman of the Inspections and Accreditation Committee for the National Association of Medical Examiner's, in 2005 29% of the United States population lived in areas served by an accredited medical examiner. Utah's OME lost accreditation in 1995 because highway deaths are not automatically under medical examiner jurisdiction in Utah Code. This is an ongoing accreditation deficiency even though Utah Code permits law enforcement officers to request Medical Examiner involvement. Law officers request Medical Examiner involvement in about 60% to 70% of all highway deaths.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- The Analyst recommends that \$160,000 ongoing General Fund for the Office of the Medical Examiner's new pathologist, be placed on the funding priority list.