

Forensic Pathology shortage in Connecticut

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Drug Deaths Overwhelm Medical Examiner's Office

Chief medical examiner needs \$300,000 to close budget gap.



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Opioid Crisis Leads to More Autopsies, Taxing Medical Examiner

A surge in drug overdose deaths has led to a 64 percent increase in autopsies by the chief medical examiner's office over the last three years, creating a \$300,000 shortfall for the agency.

Dr. James Gill, the chief medical examiner, told legislators Monday that he needs additional money to respond to the the growing workload.

"Due to staffing shortages, we have needed to resort to overtime to cover numerous essential shifts," Gill told the legislature's Appropriations Committee. "We do not expect the number of death investigations to decrease. This is the new baseline."

In 2016, drug overdose deaths surged to 917 in Connecticut, contributing to a total of 2,357 autopsies, up sharply from 1,438 in 2013. The 917 drug deaths last year represented a 25 percent increase over 2015. The 479 deaths from the synthetic opioid fentanyl represent a 155 percent increase from 2015.

The growing number of deaths from opioids have required investigations that require the expertise of the medical examiner, Gill said. His office is looking to hire two more forensic pathologists at salaries of \$190,000 per year — plus benefits — in order to keep up with the increased work.

While the medical examiner is facing a deficit, other state agencies have been holding the line on their budgets and Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#)'s budget office says the overall state surplus is projected at \$22 million for the fiscal year that ends June 30. The legislature's nonpartisan fiscal office, however, disagrees with those numbers and is projecting a deficit of nearly \$46 million in the \$20 billion annual state budget.

The state's bigger fiscal problems are coming next year when the deficit is projected at \$1.7 billion.

The budget committee is expected to make recommendations by late April on Gill's request for two additional pathologists to conduct autopsies. The committee approved the same request last year, but the extra staffing was not included in the final budget that was passed by the legislature and signed into law by Malloy.

With an annual budget of \$6.2 million, the medical examiner has 50 full-time employees who investigate about 21,000 deaths per year. Slightly more than 10 percent of those deaths require autopsies, and they are often related to suicides, homicides, accidents and sudden deaths.

Gill's office is operating under provisional certification and is trying to return to full accreditation in the fall when the office is re-evaluated.

"Our office lost full national accreditation because we do not have sufficient staff to meet the increasing volume of mandated death investigations," Gill said.

In other matters Monday, the committee heard testimony from public safety Commissioner Dora B. Schriro, who said her agency has a deficiency of \$500,000 related to workers' compensation cases. State troopers receive 100 percent of their salary if they are not working due to an injury, while civilians receive 75 percent.

"We have experienced a 38 percent increase in motor vehicle accidents involving state troopers, including crashes into their patrol cars while parked on the shoulder of roads responding to accidents and assisting motorists," Schriro said. "Fortunately, not every crash results in injury, but in most instances, a medical assessment is still necessary to make that determination."

Schriro told lawmakers that distracted drivers have been going off the road and crashing into troopers' cars for a variety of reasons, including an elderly man who fell asleep at the wheel and drove head-on into a trooper's car.

"It's a combination of distracted driving, and driving under the influence of prescription and unlawful drugs, and plain old speeding," she said.

"It's just nonstop," Schriro said of accidents regarding drunken driving. "Cars aren't cheap, and the troopers' lives are priceless."