

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Office of the Chief Medical Examiner**



**Fiscal Year 2025**  
**Budget Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
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Chief Medical Examiner

Before the  
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety  
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairperson  
Council of the District of Columbia

John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 500  
Washington, DC 20004  
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Good afternoon, Councilmember Pinto, members of the Committee, and Committee staff. I am Dr. Francisco Diaz, Chief Medical Examiner. I am pleased to testify before you today.

Mayor Bowser has presented the District's Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, "*A Fair Shot.*" This budget focuses on getting the best outcomes for residents by bolstering city services, improving the experiences of residents and businesses interacting with the District government, and providing greater opportunity for residents to learn, grow, and thrive.

The primary goal of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is to support and serve our citizens in their most critical time of need – the sudden and unexpected loss of their loved one. To achieve this, OCME operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year.

The key performance objectives of the agency include:

1. Efficient and quality medicolegal death investigation, toxicological analyses, family assistance, and expert testimony;
2. Effective quality management through continuous process improvement and quality control including maintenance of the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) accreditation;
3. Providing service as a public health and safety surveillance organization;
4. Providing expertise as the District's fatality management authority; and
5. Creating and maintaining a highly efficient, transparent, and responsive District government.

Overall, OCME works to provide the unbiased, independent death investigation of approximately 7,000 cases annually, which includes accepted medical examiner cases, cremation

requests and storage cases. Of note, the accepted medical examiner caseload has increased by approximately 46% between 2017 (1,347 cases) and 2023 (1,971 cases).

To support this important work, the Mayor proposes an agency FY25 gross budget of \$15,700,845. This represents an increase of 2.3 percent or \$346,000 over the FY24 approved gross budget of \$15,354,954. More specifically, the agency's FY25 budget provides local funds in the amount of \$15,382,843 and 101 FTEs – an increase of \$746,000 or five percent over FY24; as well as Special Purpose Revenue Funds in the amount of \$318,000 and two FTEs.

The proposed FY25 local budget includes a personal service budget of \$13,671,000 representing a net increase of \$884,000 over FY24 which includes: cost of living adjustments; step increases, and salary, fringe, and additional gross pay adjustments. Also included is \$86,210 in funding for a .34 FTE to make a whole Medical Examiner FTE – a critical position in handling caseload to ensure compliance with accrediting body standards for autopsy reporting. The local budget's nonpersonnel service budget of \$2,030,000 represents a \$538,000 decrease over FY24 approved funding to include elimination in funding for the following services: College of American Pathologists (CAP) proficiency testing, laundry, toxicology, radiation badge monitoring, autopsy suite components and maintenance, mandatory annual reporting, and fatality management and emergency response situational awareness (telecommunications).

It is important to take a few moments to review the actual work, specifically within the Death Investigation and Forensic Toxicology Division, that these decreases in services impact. The Death Investigations Division is comprised of several units, including Forensic Pathology Unit, Anthropology Laboratory & Identification Unit, Histology Laboratory, Death Investigations Unit, Mortuary Unit, and the Medical Examiner Transport Team. This Division performs the important work involving death scene investigation, decedent transport, post-mortem examination,

forensic photography, certification of cause and manner of death and fatality management and emergency response. The work of this Division is the foundation of the National Association of Medical Examiner (NAME) reaccreditation that the agency recently received in February, and our International Organization for Standardization (ISO) accreditation.

The agency's Forensic Toxicology Laboratory, currently accredited by the American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT); ISO/IEC 17025 Forensic Testing; and ISO 17025: 2017 Calibration (BrAC), tests nearly 1,400 cases per year, which includes about 8,600 specimens. In addition to performing testing on medical examiner cases, 30 percent of the laboratory testing is dedicated to Driving Under the Influence (DUI) cases for law enforcement agencies, such as Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), U.S. Park Police, and U.S. Secret Service; and approximately ten percent of the testing is for Drug Facilitated Sexual Assaults (DFSA). Moreover, the laboratory continues to lead the District's Breath Program which is accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) National Accreditation Board (ANAB).

Funding dedicated to both the Death Investigation and Forensic Toxicology Division enables the agency to procure essential supplies and services to accomplish the core mission of the agency – investigation and certification of cause and manner of death. Without adequate funding, quality death investigations and certifications, as well as the provision of forensic services to government agencies, health care entities, and grieving families are at risk. As such, the agency looks forward to continuing to work with the Mayor and this body in ensuring that the agency is fully funded toward maximum operations, maintenance of all accreditations, and to serve the next of kin and public. While the agency has been able to utilize funding from vacancy savings and direct and subgrants in past years, the agency maintains a low vacancy rate and grants are not guaranteed and are a risk to rely upon for critical funding. As such, it is essential that the agency's

local nonpersonnel budget is funded such that the agency may carry out its mission effectively and efficiently.

The Mayor's FY25 budget also provides agency one-time funding for the following: a) forensic photography equipment replacement for \$75,000; and b) for a recurring increase in vendor costs in agency public disposition services in the amount of \$70,000.

Another key division – the Fatality Review Division – is funded at \$1,256,000 for FY25, which is a \$42,000 increase over FY24, as represented in cost of living, step, and similar increases. This Division conducts the important work of reviewing developmental disabilities, child, infant, and maternal fatalities, as well as fatalities associated with violence and opioids. The fatality review process is highly complex, labor intensive, and requires extensive analysis of multi-system records (often over thousands of pages to review) for the purpose of identifying risk/protective factors on multiple levels (individual, family, community, environmental, institutional, etc.) and the circumstances leading to the death. A robust services and supplies budget and sufficient FTEs are required to support the agency's work, which enables the committee/board members to make intentional findings, recommendations, system connections, and produce annual reports.

The Mayor's proposed \$2,968,117 agency capital budget comprises three components: 1) OCME Facility Renovations; 2) Equipment Replacement; and 3) Vehicle Replacement. The Facility Renovations project's FY25 proposed funding of \$1,500,000 supports the continued build out of the agency's core facility to accommodate staff growth, as well as renovation of its Continuity of Operations (COOP) site to build out mortuary operations, supply and equipment storage space, and security and building upgrades. The proposed Equipment Replacement project funding of \$700,000 supports ongoing replacement of specialized equipment for the toxicology laboratory and death investigations divisions which is essential to incorporating industry standards

in work processes. Lastly, a new project – Vehicle Replacement – proposes \$768,000 for the replacement and outfitting of agency fleet vehicles as they reach the end of their useful life. Such vehicles include those used for death scene response and transportation of decedents; fatality management and emergency response; public health surveillance; and registering and archiving records.

In addition to ensuring that the agency has professional and academic expertise, updated and thorough standard operating procedures, and an in-depth quality program, it is the agency's responsibility to ensure that it has an operational and safe facility and work areas, as well as the appropriate equipment, supplies, and fleet. The agency maintains a commitment to the principle of fiscal accountability in its budgetary spending plan and will continue to support the public's trust as we manage our current FY24 and proposed FY25 budgets.

In closing, the resources allocated to OCME in the Mayor's FY25 budget play a critical role in supporting residents' efforts to reach and remain on the pathway to the middle class. The Council and this Committee are critical allies in this effort, and I appreciate your work to ensure we operate efficiently and effectively. I look forward to our continued work together to achieve our shared goals and give all residents a fair shot.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.