



Saving Lives through Better Understanding of Deaths: NCHS better supporting medical examiners and coroners



Medical examiner and coroner offices (MECs) and the data they provide to state and local vital records jurisdictions are critical to informing public health and safety. However, as a local or state function, MECs cannot easily communicate nationally on data, practices, and procedures. Therefore, the newly established NCHS Collaborating Office for Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC) office is crucial in coordinating and supporting these offices to yield comprehensive, timely, and accurate information to the National Vital Statistics System to enhance public health and save lives.

Without resources COMEC cannot meet this promise. However, with additional funding, NCHS could increase investment in COMEC and bolster the following functions:

Standardization of data collection: Consistent protocols for data collection are critically needed as MECs use disparate, non-interoperable systems. Consistency in data reporting facilitates the analysis and comparison of findings, yielding improved insights and decision-making. With adequate support, COMEC can help standardize data formats and provide associated training and implementation resources.

Training and education: MECs need more training and continuing education programs. Professional development training ensures that MECs have the necessary expertise to provide complete data and take advantage of system modernization. Adequate funding would allow COMEC to facilitate training programs and continuing education opportunities for MECs, including programs that focus on enhancing expertise in medicolegal death investigation, evidence collection, death certification (including cause and manner of death determination), mental health and well-being, and proper documentation practices.

Collaboration and information sharing: MECs siloed design often restricts collaboration and information sharing across jurisdictions, inhibiting exposure to evidence-based practices. COMEC can encourage collaboration among MECs and other relevant stakeholders, like vital records jurisdictions, by establishing networks and platforms for sharing information, maintaining a MEC's directory, best practices, and research findings. With suitable funding, COMEC can facilitate the exchange of valuable insights and promote the adoption of standardized procedures across jurisdictions.

Research and technology advancement: To capitalize on advanced technologies, tools and methodologies in MDI and evidence-based best practices, MECs need additional support to fund research and encourage innovation. Advanced technologies can include postmortem imaging techniques, forensic toxicology, genetic testing, and data analysis methods. In contrast, evidence-based recommendations can include guidance about staffing, scene investigation, ordering toxicology, and requesting forensic pathologist services. With adequate support, COMEC can support research initiatives to improve forensic medicine and medicolegal death investigations.

Quality assurance: Ensuring consistent processes and procedures among MECs is challenging. COMEC can establish mechanisms for quality assurance of the work conducted by MECs, including the implementation review processes to assess the accuracy and completeness of reports, ensuring adherence to established standards and protocols, especially in smaller offices with limited internal resources to turn to for this service.

Overall, COMEC can expand its role to support information-gathering efforts of MECs and can play a vital role in improving public health outcomes and saving lives. Funding for COMEC is consistent with the Friends of NCHS funding recommendations for [FY24](#) and [FY25](#). For more information, contact Steve Pierson, chair of Friends of NCHS: spierson@amstat.org.