

Office of the Medical Investigator

Heather Jarrell, MD

Chief Medical Investigator

August 11, 2022

Thank you!

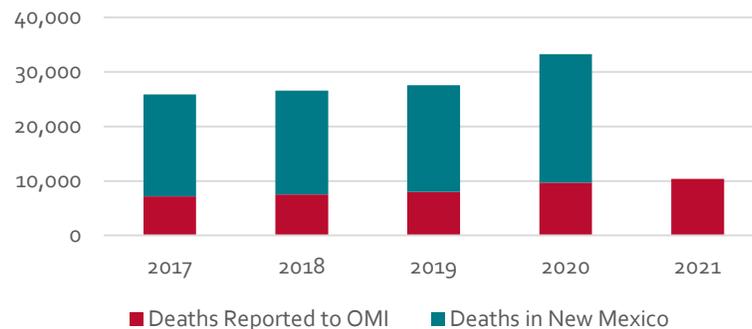
- Thank you for inviting me to speak today and for the opportunity to share with you all about the Office of the Medical Investigator
- Heartfelt thank you for the continuous support from the NM Legislators, including securing additional recurring and non-recurring funding.
- Thank you to the OMI Board, UNM, and the people of New Mexico for the honor of serving as New Mexico's 6th Chief Medical Examiner



Mission: *We investigate deaths to serve the living. Our work will improve health, safety, and justice in New Mexico.*

- OMI created in 1972 by state legislature to investigate all reportable deaths in NM

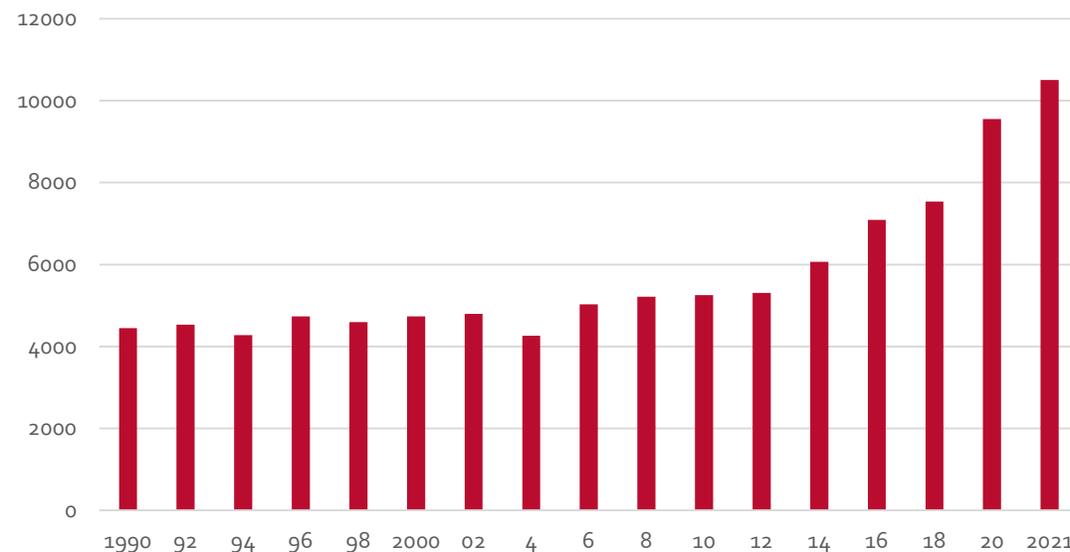
Deaths Reported to OMI vs Total NM Deaths



www.nmhealth.org

Caseload has doubled in the past 10 years, but state appropriations have only increased by 25%.

Caseload by Year



Statutory Obligations, Operations, and Services

- OMI Charge: “receive and respond to all sudden, unexpected, or unexplained deaths.” 7.3.2.8 NMAC



Scene investigation

Transportation



Examination



Court

Federal, State, Community Partnerships

Casework and Collaboration

- Law enforcement (local police and sheriff, state police, FBI, DEA, BIA)
- NM courts (criminal and civil)
- Federal court
- Hospitals
- Air Force Bases (Kirtland, White Sands, Holloman)
- 19 pueblos, Navajo Nation, Sovereign Nation in Arizona

Public Health

- Homelessness (Albuquerque Healthcare Center for the Homeless); National Health Care for the Homeless Conference and Policy Symposium (*Homeless Mortality: Getting Started, Data, and How to Use it to Advocate for Policy Change*)
- Elder Abuse/Neglect Death Review (UNM, DOH, Aging and Long-Term Services)
- Child Fatality Reviews
- Substance Use Disorders/Overdose Deaths (DOH, DEA)
- In custody deaths/recently released inmate deaths (Envive Solutions, DOH, Project ECHO)
- Occupational Fatalities
- Consumer Product-Associated Deaths (US Consumer Product Safety Commission)
- Infectious Disease Deaths (DOH)

Grief Services Program

- OMI is fortunate to have a state funded Grief Services program
- Provides master's level mental health professionals grieving the loss of loved ones from homicide, suicide, drugs, motor vehicle collisions, and COVID-19.
- Serves over 4,000 people
- Hosts up to 3 masters level students (interns) yearly
- Expanding Spanish speaking capabilities to better serve those in need
- Expanding to include Child Trauma Consultant
- Past and current VOCA funding



Forensic Anthropology Services and Advancement of Techniques to Assist in Identification of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

- Received funding from National Institute of Justice and Congressionally Delegated Spending to improve science behind anthropological profile determination, helping to narrow the pool of missing people for comparison
<https://hsc.unm.edu/omi/investigations/missing.html>
- Improve accuracy of determination of Native American versus Hispanic/Latinx, improve estimation of height, improve age estimation in juveniles.
- Data is currently being shared with other anthropologists
- Involved mapping migrant deaths along the border
- Development of a Native American advisory group



Heather Edgar, PhD (Forensic anthropologist, Associate Professor of Anthropology)

Impacts from Pandemic

- Further highlighted understaffing and need for adequate funding
 1. Scientific Working Group for Medicolegal Death Investigation (SWGMDI): A Report and Recommendations Prepared by the System Infrastructure Committee of the SWGMDI

Parameter	Formula	Number at OMI 2019 (pre-pandemic)	Number at OMI currently
Number of investigators	9 per 1,000,000 people	13	14
Number of autopsy technicians	7 per 1,000 autopsies	17	17

Significance of OMI Accreditation loss: Jurisprudence cases challenged, negative impact on faculty/staff recruitment, grant applications, trainee recruitment.

COVID-19 Impacts on OMI and NM Counties

- From April 2020 until June 2022, the OMI utilized refrigerated trucks for additional decedent storage
- As many as 9 refrigerated trucks were utilized

Learning Opportunities

1. Increased death rate and caseload amplified inefficiencies with regard to unclaimed decedents (legal next of kin searches, identification methods/processes)
2. Afforded chance to reexamine state statutes with regard to unclaimed decedents

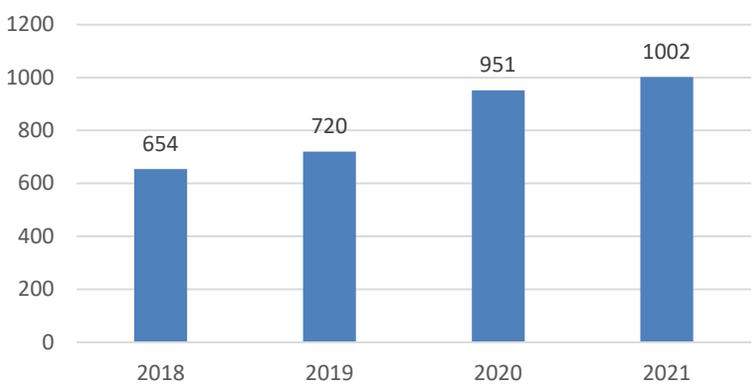




Year	Examinations Performed at the OMI
2019	3,200
2020	3,899
2021	4,584
2022 (Jan to Aug 1)	2,386 (predicted annual volume 3,456)*

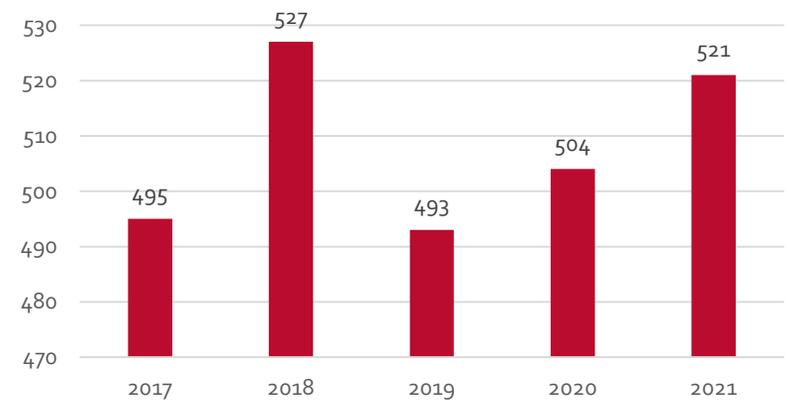
*Still above pre-pandemic volume

Drug Caused Deaths in NM, 2018-2021



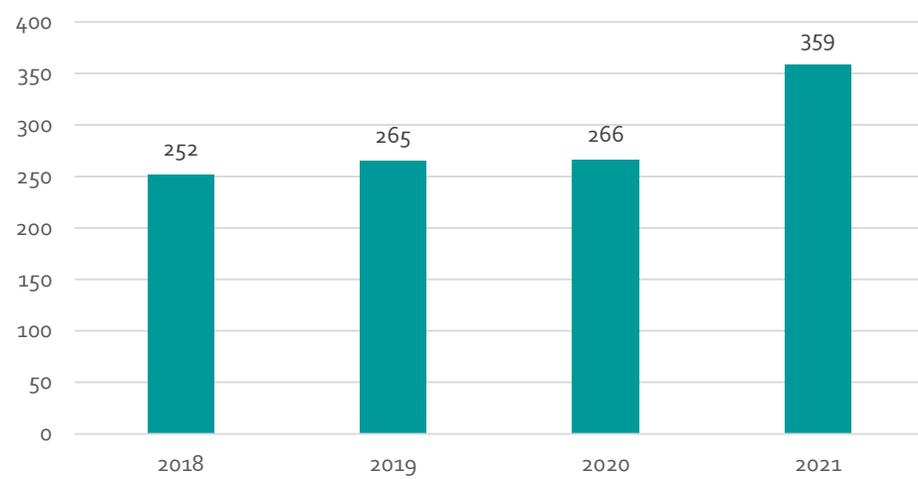
35% increase in drug-caused deaths in NM since 2018

NM Deaths by Suicide



5% increase in suicides since 2019

NM Deaths by Homicide



30% increase in Homicides since 2018

Office of the Medical Investigator, proposed RPSP Expansion Request

FY24 RPSP Funding Request: \$3,065,400

- Current understaffing and underfunding cannot meet demands of increased case loads, which jeopardizes OMI's accreditation and causes delays in scene response, death certification, and delays in final reports (negatively impacts other state agencies and jurisprudence).

Goal: Increase Staffing to Meet State's Needs and Maintain Accreditation (roughly 128% of state appropriations)

- Scientific Working Group recommendation for minimum number of investigators for NM population is 17 (OMI currently has 14)
- Addition of 12th Forensic Pathologist to avoid accreditation deficiencies (number of autopsies per pathologist have far exceeded maximum allowances)

Goal: Cover increased cost of decedent transportation from scene of death to the OMI (roughly 30% of OMI state appropriations)

- Increased transportation costs for decedent transport to OMI for examination (third party vendors paid at set fee per mile, which hasn't increased in past 3 years). Transportation is the second largest cost for the OMI and is absolutely necessary to fulfill mandated duties.

Revenue

Operating Revenue		
	University Hospital Revenue	\$855,856
	Sandoval Regional Revenue	\$38,512
	Other Sales and Services (Cremation Permits)	\$5,013,366
Non-operating Revenue		
	State Appropriation	\$6,987,900
	State Appropriation: Non-Recurring	\$500,000
	Junior Bill Appropriation: Non-Recurring	\$100,000



Cremation Permits are a key source of revenue. The OMI relies on this revenue to operate.

Major Expenses

Salary & Fringe		\$8,985,116
Body Transportation		\$1,905,085

Importance of fully funding the OMI

- Cremation permit revenue is mandatory
- Without adequate funding, staffing cuts will be necessary in the face of growing mandatory caseloads



shutterstock.com - 1401098891

- Accreditation at risk without adequate staffing

Capital Outlay Request, FY24

1. Autopsy tables x 16 (\$408,480)
2. Vehicles x 2 (\$70,000)
3. -80 Freezers x 2 (\$81,400)
4. Washers and Dryers (\$32,000)

Total: \$591,880



Pandemic Lessons Learned and Improvement Opportunities

Desired Changes in State Statute Pertaining to Disposition of Unclaimed Decedents

Problems:

1. Statutes have not been updated in decades
2. Responsibilities/roles not clearly defined.
3. Processes and procedures are outdated.

Goals:

1. Create an efficient process that respectfully honors decedents.
2. Clearly define the process of disposition of unclaimed decedents.
3. Collaborate with counties and funeral homes to develop contemporary standards.

Thank you!

- Thank you for your time and for this opportunity!