

LD2214 Testimony

Senator Rotundo, Senator Sachs, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs committee, my name is Erik Hyatt, and I am the Director of Mortuary and Laboratory Operations for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Thank you for your valuable time and letting me speak to the three budget initiatives on page A-22 of LD2214 that affect the OCME.

The OCME does work that is integral to the safety and well-being of the citizens of Maine. Beyond what has been popularized on many crime-shows, we also provide answers to families that don't understand why someone would suddenly pass on with no previous medical concerns; we can screen for genetic issues that can save other family members. We track all the missing individuals in the State of Maine and hope they never make it to our office, but if they sadly do we have the means to identify and return them to their families. We provide and correlate the data to try and help combat the opioid pandemic. We helped to develop a program to track all drugs in fatal motor vehicle accidents for a more accurate picture of the safety of our roadways. We educate students from high school upward interested in forensics who want to know what we really do and how we do it.

We also see some of the worst things that can happen to people: Three Maine Maritime students, 2 plane crash victims, 46 homicides just last year, and Lewiston.

These were 70 people of the 507 that came through our doors last year, the 2,507 we took jurisdiction of and the 4,122 calls we took as an office of 12 people.

We weren't prepared for Lewiston. We adapted and overcame. Four of us went to the scene. When we returned, the two Medical Examiner Assistants, who have to split being available 24/7 365, and I processed every victim with help from New Hampshire and Maine State Police Evidence Recovery Teams and the latent print specialist from our Maine State Police Crime Lab. From that first notification until all the victims were returned to their families was 132 hours.

The office personnel made sure we had everything we needed during this time along with all the calls from outside agencies and organizations who needed information. They also took eighty more cases during that time period. Still serving all the people of Maine.

It seems gauche to have to talk about operational costs in the wake of such a tragedy, but we have to.

As an office of 12 working with a 2.6-million-dollar budget that covers payroll to supplies we are at wit's end. According to the National Association of Medical Examiners, we operate on about half of the national average. I order the operational supplies, and I'm having to order some of them on Amazon to try and keep the budget balanced and maintain our NAME accreditation. To do our jobs, to serve Maine, we need to be able to pay our staff and provide them with the proper safe tools to do it.

Please. My people are burned. Support them. These initiatives will help remove the worry of whether they will get paid and if they'll have the equipment to do an already harrowing job safely. These twelve people are of service to the People of Maine in a job that no one wants to talk about or see what they see on a daily basis. I will also ask for the approval of LD610 bringing the OCME into the 1998 Special retirement just like all the responders to that day already have.

Erik Hyatt