

January 31, 2025

Testimony in support of LD137

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and the distinguished members of the Maine State Labor Committee, my name is Erik Hyatt, I am the Director of Laboratory and Morgue Operations at the Maine Office of Chief Medical Examiner, and I am here in support of LD137 "An Act to Expand the 1998 Special Retirement Plan to Include Employees Who Work for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner".

I started this journey regarding our retirement on 11/20/2019 with a letter to former Senator William Diamond asking him to consider adding us to LD1355 during the 128th state legislature in conjunction with the Crime Lab and Computer Crimes Division. I then testified in early 2020 via zoom due to the pandemic, resulting in an immediate break to a work session to add us to the bill. Last year, 2024, LD610 made it through appropriations but was left unsigned by the governor.

Since that first of many letters, The Office of Chief Medical Examiner has received death reports on 20,577 Mainers and visitors to our state. 7,472 of those cases have been examined and had various samples processed by staff for toxicology studies. 2,282 of those people have passed through our doors and were respectfully examined and/or autopsied, sewed, cleaned and returned to their families. We have 12 people when we are fully staffed.

Every morning, we meet to discuss cases that have been called in and determine the best course of action. So, aside from sick or vacation days, the staff has listened to 20,577 end of life narratives to include the who, what, when, where, and how a person came to our care. From the natural passings that get called in, to the motor vehicle accidents, the homicides, the forgotten ones that are no longer recognizable because no one knew they passed or were finally found after months/years of searching, to the children. Victims and descriptions most would not wish to hear about.

After meeting, upstairs follow up is done, gathering documentation, records, scene photos, speaking with grieving family members and taking more death calls. Downstairs we don protective gear and begin with photographs, documenting the state of the decedent, x-rays, evidence and sample collection, evisceration, sewing, and cleaning the deceased. Occasionally, but more often than you might think, we use a 30-gal shop vac to vacuum up maggots before we can begin. On those days the whole building knows what we are doing because the current exhaust fans don't keep up with the odor. But we keep coming back to work.

We all have cases we can't get out of our heads. I have several. Toddlers that look like my grandkids, the woman whose face came off in my hands while repositioning her for an x-ray. Or how about pulling pieces of human out of a tree after a plane crash, or pulling my neighbors' nephew out of a burned car, not to mention Lewiston.

January 6th, 2025, after morning meeting and listening to and discussing another 41 end of life narratives from the weekend, the Chief looked at me and asked, "Are you all right?" My response

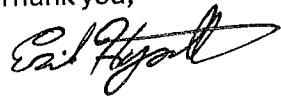
was, "I'm not sure if I'm having a heart or anxiety attack." My coworkers then watched me get loaded into the ambulance, and then they still went back to work to make sure there was closure for the families of Maine. I do not want ER trips for them.

We keep plugging along. Understaffed, underfunded, and forgotten because very few want to deal with what we deal with. There is a documented sociological stigma surrounding death. It wears on us, but we believe what we are doing is important to the families and the health of Maine.

This retirement would give us hope to be able to recover and enjoy our retirement after serving the State of Maine in a job that most would not and could not do.

Please support LD137.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erik Hyatt", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Erik Hyatt

Farmingdale