

Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner

2024 Legislative Session

BACKGROUND

- In 1999, Iowa enacted a law moving the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME) from the Department of Public Safety to the Department of Public Health.
- The IOSME is now under the Department of Health and Human Services.
- The role of forensic pathologists and death investigators is to investigate sudden, unnatural, suspicious, or violent deaths.
- After the retirement of one full-time forensic pathologist in May, the IOSME will have four full-time board-certified forensic pathologists, seven part-time board-certified forensic pathologists, and four medical examiner investigator liaisons.
- Forensic pathology is an extremely specialized service and skill. There are only eight board certified forensic pathologists in the entire state of Iowa with two of the eight having recently retired. Recruiting additional pathologists to the state takes significant time and effort due to such specialization.
- IOSME has successfully recruited two additional forensic pathologists, one set to begin January 2024 and the other set to begin in summer 2024. These additions will bring the team up to 6 full-time forensic pathologists.

FUNDING AND FEES

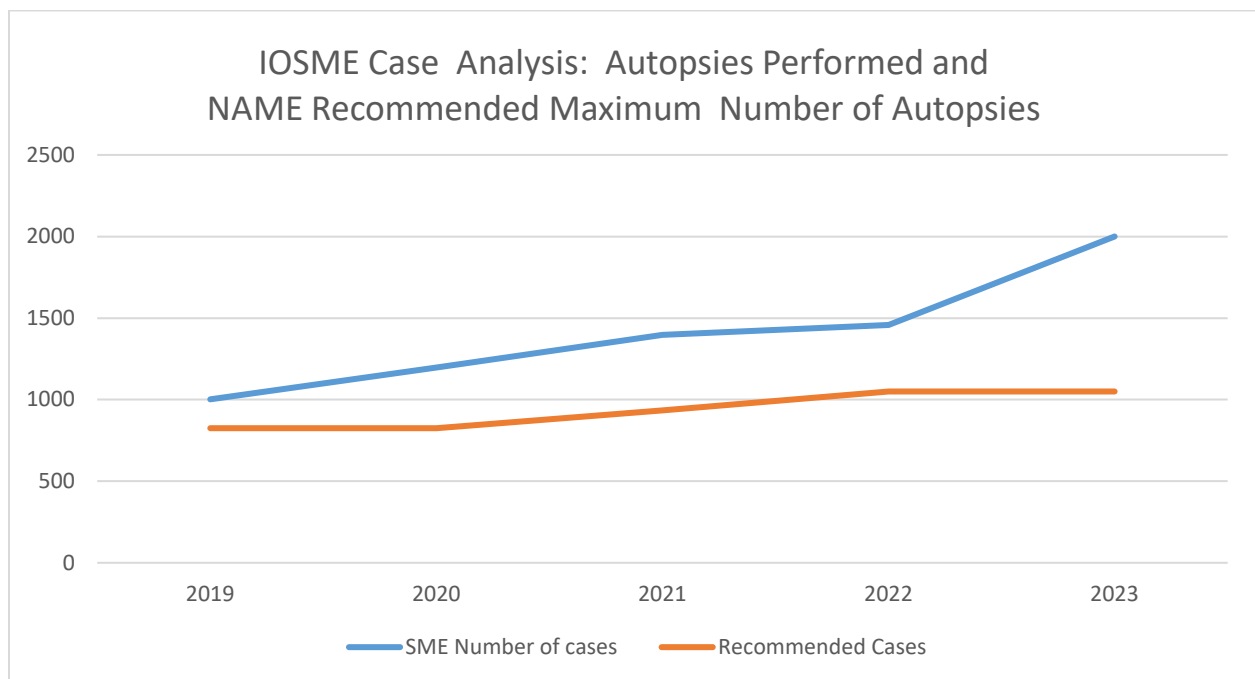
- The IOSME is funded in a unique way compared to other states.
- Revenues include autopsy fees paid by counties, the state general fund, and death certificate fees.
- In 2016, the IOSME received a fee increase that covered part of the existing need without considering new caseload growth.
- In 2021, the office received an increase in general fund appropriation, allowing the hire of a fifth pathologist (now temporarily offset by a retirement in May) to alleviate a backlog in autopsies that occurred as a result of the increase in the number of counties relying on the IOSME for autopsy services.
- The current autopsy fee is \$1,900.
- Private autopsy fees in other states: Minnesota (\$2,500), Illinois (\$2,200), Indiana (\$2,500), Missouri (\$3,000)

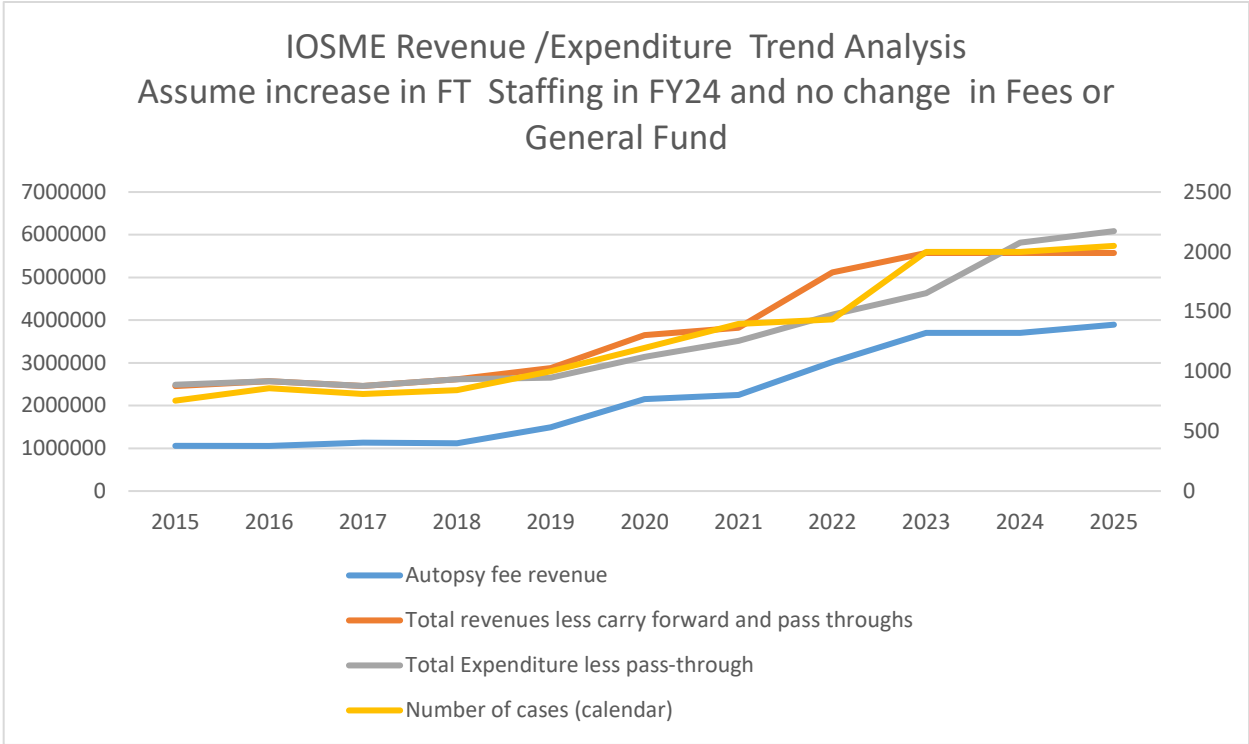
DISCUSSION

Accreditation and increasing caseload

- The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) accredits the IOSME.
- This accreditation is important to maintaining the integrity of autopsies and investigations, homicide trial court testimony, and eligibility for federal grants.

- To remain accredited, IOSME’s board-certified forensic pathologists who work for the IOSME are limited in the number of autopsies they can perform per year.
- Pathologists should aim to perform around 200 autopsies per year. Per NAME, staff pathologists should not perform more than 250 autopsies per year.
- The Chief SME should perform no more than 150 autopsies per year.
- The IOSME was on track for each of the staff pathologists, including the Chief SME, to perform 260 autopsies in 2022. The Chief SME ultimately performed 281 autopsies in 2022, with each staff pathologist performing 260 autopsies on average. The IOSME is likely to perform more than 350 autopsies per pathologist in 2023.
- The number of autopsies performed by the IOSME doubled in 2022 from the number performed in 2018.
- In 2020 due to increase in case load that led to delays in performing autopsies, and high numbers of autopsies performed by each pathologist, the IOSME was placed on a provisional status in its accreditation with NAME (a warning designation that if deficiencies are not corrected in one year accreditation would be revoked). By adding a fifth pathologist, the IOSME restored full accreditation status in 2021.
- The IOSME is currently experiencing a 1-week wait time for autopsies due to increased caseload.





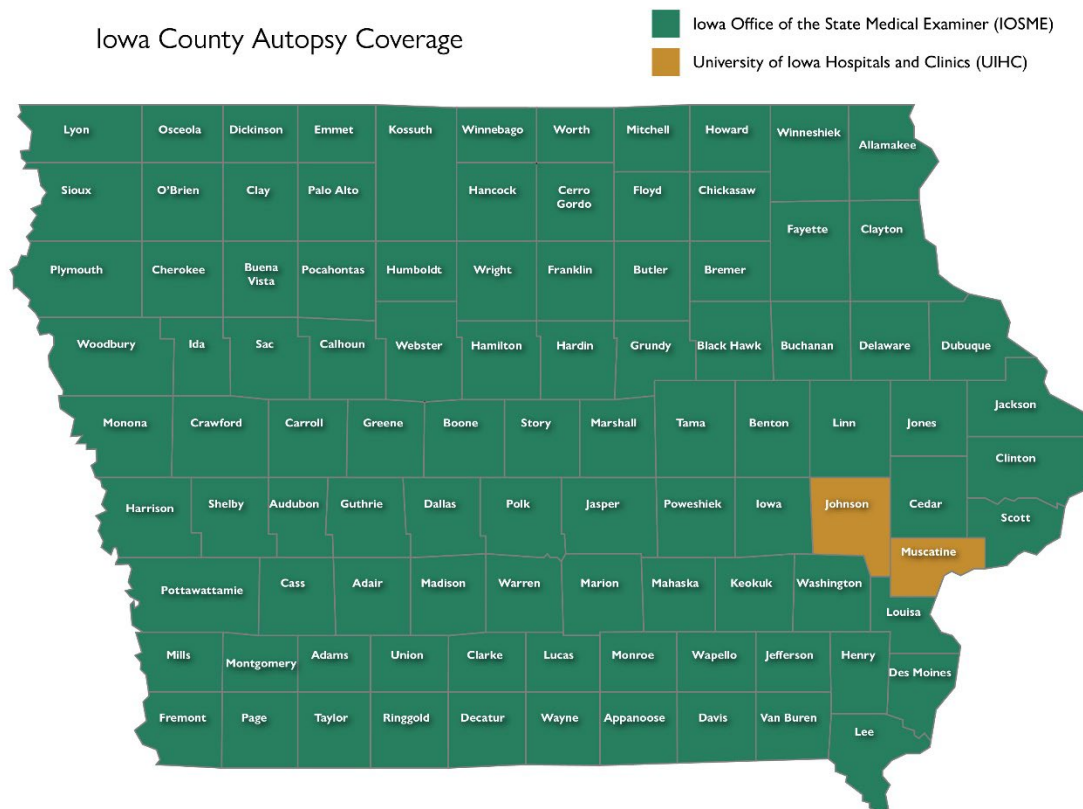
Polk County

- The former chief pathologist at Polk County announced his resignation in October 2022.
- IOSME covered all of Polk County’s autopsies for 1 year.
- The new Polk County Chief Pathologist began his tenure at the end of October 2023.
- The current Polk County Chief Pathologist plans to perform some of the Polk County autopsies and continue to rely on IOSME for continued autopsy service until a second Polk County Pathologist can be recruited and hired.
- IOSME has entered into a contract with Forensic Pathology Services (FPS) for the use of travelling pathologists to decrease long wait times lowa families were experiencing due to increased caseload from Polk County.
- Any cases performed by FPS still count against full-time pathologist autopsy caps for accreditation, so while the contract with FPS has aided IOSME’s priority of maintaining short wait times for lowa families, cases performed by FPS do not alleviate likely accreditation demerits.

TAKEAWAY

HHS is committed to providing the legislature and the public the most up-to-date information on the IOSME including updates on caseload. While the IOSME routinely analyzes caseload trends to anticipate future workload, the unpredictable nature of the types of deaths the office investigates can make these estimations challenging.

With the resignation of the Polk County pathologist, even temporarily, it will have a negative impact on the IOSME's workload. Recruitment and retention of forensic pathologists is a national problem. Successful recruitment and retention of forensic pathologists relies on ME offices being able to maintain a good reputation, ensure appropriate workload, maintain NAME accreditation, provide a good facility/work environment, and competitive salaries.



Carrie Malone
Director of Government Relations
cmalone@dhs.state.ia.us