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News Release

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Wayne County, U-M agreement will save medical examiner costs

Wayne County and the University of Michigan Health System have agreed to a partnership for forensic services that will save taxpayers at least \$1.5 million and create new educational opportunities.

Following months of negotiations, a three-year agreement between the county and the University of Michigan Health System will begin Oct. 1. The Wayne County Commission approved the agreement today (Sept. 22); the Health System approved the pact last month.

The Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office is one of the busiest in the United States, conducting about 2,500 autopsies a year to determine the cause and manner of sudden and unexpected deaths in the state's most populated county.

As a result of the economic recession, funding for the office fell by 20 percent from 2007 to 2011, from \$8.1 million to \$6.2 million. Its budget for 2011-12 is \$5.7 million.

"With declining resources, government must aggressively look for creative strategies to maintain services," said Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano. "This collaboration with U-M is a partnership that will benefit both parties and the public we serve."

Highlights of the agreement include:

- The Medical Examiner's Office would remain a department of Wayne County government with statutory responsibilities remaining with the county medical examiner, who is appointed by the county. The county's American Board of Pathology-certified pathologists, including Medical Examiner Dr. Carl Schmidt, would become U-M employees. Wayne County would continue to employ other employees, including forensic investigators, autopsy technicians and clerical staff.

- The combined staff would support the case volume in the southeast Michigan region while achieving and maintaining accreditation from the National Association of Medical Examiners. Since 2009, U-M has provided services to Washtenaw County under a similar agreement, conducting about 250 autopsies per year. Wayne County's contract to provide forensic services to Monroe County would also continue.
- Wayne County would save about \$1.5 million over the three-year contract through shared resources and economies of scale. Savings would be created by sharing staffing coverage between the U-M and Wayne County offices; expanding forensic fellowship and pathology residency programs; combining laboratory testing; and utilizing U-M's on-site histology (tissue examination) capabilities.
- Toxicology services currently performed at the county's lab would shift to an independent facility that U-M currently uses. Microscopic tissue analysis would be conducted at U-M.
- Wayne County would continue to provide training for medical students and residents from the Detroit Medical Center, Wayne State University, William Beaumont Hospital, Henry Ford Hospital and St. John Hospital.
- The nationally recognized U-M Department of Pathology would receive additional training and academic opportunities in forensic pathology at a time when there is a national shortage of qualified forensic pathologists.

The agreement requires elimination of five of the 31 employee positions at the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office. However, three of the five employees will continue employment with Wayne County government and one employee will retire.

Under terms of the agreement, all forensic examinations and academic training would be conducted in an open, transparent manner in accordance with guidelines set out by the National Association of Medical Examiners, state and federal law, and the University's internal oversight bodies.

The U-M Health System also works in partnership with many other medical and research institutions around the state, including providing emergency department staffing at Hurley Medical Center in Flint; offering radiation therapy services in cities such as Lansing and Jackson, and leading multi-hospital projects to improve heart, cancer and surgical care for patients from Detroit to Grand Rapids.

"We welcome this opportunity to collaborate with Wayne County to provide this critical public service," says Jeffrey Jentzen, M.D., Ph.D., director of autopsy and forensic services at U-M. "We are committed to working together to deliver the best possible service to Wayne County residents."

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