



# Medical examiner reduces backlog, but delays persist

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**The Massachusetts medical examiner's office continued to experience delays last year and its national accreditation remains in jeopardy.**

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 09, 2017

The Massachusetts medical examiner's office last year accelerated its processing of death certificates and autopsy reports, which allowed it to cut down on a backlog of years-old paperwork.

But the office continued to experience delays and its national accreditation remains in jeopardy, in part because its leaders have struggled to hire as many forensic pathologists as they would like, largely due to a nationwide shortage in the profession.

“These delays have adversely impacted families who need a final death certificate and autopsy report to settle life insurance claims or probate matters or to simply explain why their family member or loved one died,” Chief Medical Examiner Henry M. Niels wrote in a recent annual year-end report to the Legislature.

The office had faced criticism in recent years over delays in performing autopsies.



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In [fall 2015](#), the agency implemented a [new organizational approach](#) that included hiring a dozen new support staff to do administrative tasks.

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Since then, the office has processed cases in a much more timely manner.

For example, prior to implementation of its new approach, the office said it completed just 56 percent of death certificates, and 25 percent of autopsy reports, within 90 days.

In the 12-month period after implementing the new approach, the office finalized 81 percent of death certificates, and 72 percent of autopsies, within 90 days.

But those improved results are still shy of a standard set by the National Association of Medical Examiners that calls for 90 percent of autopsy reports to be completed within 90 days. The state medical examiner office's inability to reach that standard is the last hurdle preventing it from

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achieving full accreditation.

The office has had provisional accreditation for four years. Because there's a five-year limit on such a status, the office will lose its accreditation altogether and be forced to reapply if it cannot meet the association's standards for full status by the end of this year.

Felix Browne, a spokesman for the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, said in an e-mail that while achieving full accreditation remains a goal, it is a voluntary program and that having to reapply for accreditation "will not affect the services the OCME provides, nor do we expect any negative impacts as a result."

Nields' report, citing a heavy workload per medical examiner, emphasized the continued need for more forensic pathologists.

The office has said it has [struggled](#) to hire more forensic pathologists because of a national shortage, as well as public attention following [blunders at the Massachusetts office](#) several years ago.

The agency said it also looks to a fellowship program it runs to help it train and recruit forensic pathologists.

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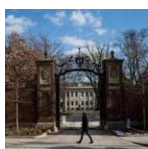
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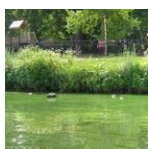
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## Mother of Conrad Roy III seeks \$4.2m in wrongful death suit against Michelle Carter

Lynn Roy says she is seeking damages "caused by the defendant's negligence and wanton and reckless conduct." [MORE...](#)

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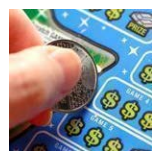
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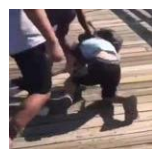
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## Michelle Carter receives 15 months in jail; will remain free pending appeal

A judge sentenced Michelle Carter to two and a half years, with 15 months to serve and 15 months probation, for goading her boyfriend to kill himself in a high-profile texting suicide case. However, he allowed Carter to remain free while awaiting appeal. [MORE...](#)



## 'Dukes of Hazzard' actor arrested in Waltham

Tom Wopat was arraigned on a charge of groping a woman who was to share the stage with him in a local production of "42nd Street." [MORE...](#)

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