



In upstate New York, a new paperless process has forged digital links among medical examiners, vital records, and law enforcement officials. In the course of restructuring its Medical Examiner Program, Tompkins County turned to the County's Laserfiche system to streamline the way it manages medical examiner's death investigation filings, autopsy results and toxicology reports to save time and trouble. Current and accurate information is more readily accessible to families and public officials with questions about unattended deaths.

### County Takes a Fresh Look at the Death Investigation Process

Tompkins County's Medical Examiner (ME) Program is operated by the County's Public Health Department. Formerly services were divided among several independent providers, including out-of-county pathology resources. The Legislature voted to consolidate services to a team consisting of a Chief Medical Investigator and two Medical Examiners based in Ithaca's Cayuga Medical Center (CMC) to provide investigations and autopsy services locally. By doing so, the move shifts resources from transportation costs to improved Medical Examiner professional services.

### Online Report Filing Simplifies and Secures ME Paperwork Submission

That same month, a project request came into the Tompkins County IT Department. Early in her needs assessment process, Systems Administrator Katy Prince saw that Laserfiche was an easy fit. "The ME's wanted to submit reports electronically, know that they wouldn't get lost and that the medical information would remain private in a secure location.

"After I met face-to-face with the ME's," Prince recalls, "I saw this as a pretty straightforward solution. They were handwriting data on a printed form." This form was her starting point for taking things digitally. Her first Laserfiche Form review was a hit, as was the ability to work with it across platforms for total portability. Following a brief beta test, the first live submission came within three months of Prince's initial face-to-face meeting with the ME team.

### A Better Process Yields Better Answers in Troubling Circumstances

"Awesome," is the word Chief Death Investigator Jennifer Edelman uses to describe the system. "Our team is very busy and we wanted an easy-to-use reporting system. I can start a case on-scene on my phone, save it and finish it later on my office computer. This process improves communications



and reduces duplication of effort." Once an ME opens a case form, he or she can upload photos and forensic reports as addendums managed by Laserfiche. "Reports go in directly without transcription errors. I'm spending 20 minutes on tasks that could've taken over an hour before," Edelman adds.

While her beat includes accidents, fires, and the rare violent act, the vast majority of Edelman's cases involve determining the cause of an unexpected death. "I work closely with law enforcement, first responders, our pathologists, next of kin, family doctors and funeral homes. My goal is to assist the decedent's family through this hard time by providing them with the answer to why their loved one has passed," is how she describes her mission. "Our Laserfiche system increases our ability to produce appropriate results by assuring that accurate data gets to Vital Records."

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## Paperless ME Program System Lightens the Load in Vital Records

At the same time, Prince's Laserfiche solution attacked a document mess over in the Health Department, where ME Program files are the responsibility of Deputy Registrar of Vital Record David Warmbrodt. Compared to his routine duties registering births and deaths, he says, "Dealing with medical examination filings involved a lot of time and came with all the misadventures you can get dealing with a haphazard paper system."

Although death investigation cases are the exception rather than the rule, they forced him to keep track of a variety of incoming faxes, couriered reports and mail submissions over the course of weeks or even months. "So much from so many directions; clunky to keep organized," Warmbrodt observes. "Streamlining was important to me because the paper process could become a bear."

Now Warmbrodt receives email notifications as ME uploads flow into the proper Laserfiche case folders. He no longer has to determine a case number and create, label and file a physical folder. The status of pending information is readily apparent. And when it comes to retrieval sparked by litigation, criminal investigation or public health research, he expects things to go much more smoothly in the future. "No more visits to a records closet and pawing through eleventy-eleven bankers' boxes and manila file folders to locate a case," he says.

## Automated Case File Management Means More Time for Higher-Value Tasks

Katy Prince says she is a believer in "Simpler is easier", so she kept things as simple as possible. The end users of the ME Program are shielded from process steps." Once the intake form is live, Laserfiche offers an addendum form to simplify the subsequent submission of related correspondence, forensic files and photos to the proper folder as they become available. After a case is tagged as closed, the system moves it to inactive/ retention status.

The intake form has provisions to record a corresponding law enforcement case number or 911 call center incident number for integration with other agencies' databases. This makes it much easier in the event a prosecutor, or the County Sheriff or City and State Police need to check on an official cause of death in the course of their investigations. Authorized users can search against their ID criteria and pull the information they need without travelling to the Vital Records Department or requesting and waiting for copies.

"The new system is a huge time saver," says Edelman. "When a case is open, ME's can communicate directly with Vital Records and the rest of the team without paper. Because we can better share and coordinate information, there's less duplication and post-investigative work required to close a case." On-scene, having fewer paper distractions helps her better support law enforcement personnel who aren't trained to spot medically related evidence and to reassure family members that their concerns are being addressed.

Warmbrodt sums things up by saying "We are achieving what we needed to achieve with our Laserfiche solution. Working with PDF files instead of paper results in a much more efficient management process."

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