

MEDICAL EXAMINERS COMMISSION MEETING
Embassy Suites by Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista South
4955 Kyngs Heath Rd
Kissimmee, FL 34746
May 13, 2025, 10:00 AM EDT

Commission Chairman Barbara C. Wolf, M.D., called the meeting of the Medical Examiners Commission to order at **10:00 AM**. She advised those in the audience that the meetings of the Medical Examiners Commission are open to the public and that members of the public will be allowed five minutes to speak. She then welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked Commission members, staff, and audience members to introduce themselves.

Commission members present:

Barbara C. Wolf, M.D., Districts 5 & 24 Medical Examiner
Brian Fernandes, J.D., Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor, Office of the Attorney General
Kenneth T. Jones, State Registrar, Department of Health
Robin Giddens Sheppard, L.F.D., Funeral Director
Hon. Charlie Cofer, J.D., Public Defender, 4th Judicial Circuit
Joshua Stephany, M.D., Districts 9 & 25 Medical Examiner
Hon. Amira Fox, J.D., State Attorney, 20th Judicial Circuit
Hon. Robert "Bob" Johnson, Santa Rosa County Sheriff

Commission staff present:

Brett Kirkland, Ph.D.	Megan Neel
Ashley Bullard	Ashley Williams
Natalie Bielby, J.D.	

District Medical Examiners present:

Deanna Oleske, M.D. (District 1)	Sajid S. Qaiser, M.D. (District 18)
Russell S. Vega, M.D. (Districts 12 & 22)	Jon R. Thogmartin, M.D. (District 6)

Other District personnel present:

Bill Pellam (District 6 and 8)	Dan Schebler (District 1)
Ricardo Camacho (District 2)	Ralph Saccone (District 15)
Sheri Blanton (District 9/25)	Paul Petrino (District 15)
Cassie Bates (District 15)	

Guests present:

Chad Brown, Director of Criminal Justice Professionalism (FDLE)	Gabe Feltner (Othram)
Jonathan Rigsby, Senior Crime Intelligence Analyst II (FDLE)	Heather Hensley (LWVI)
Leigh Clark, Chief of Forensic Services (FDLE)	Shane Lockwood (Florida Department of Health, St. Johns County)
Tinene Alter (DNA Labs International)	Phoebe Stubblefield (UF CAPHIL)
Katelyn Atkins (CorneaGen)	Caitlin Field (UF CAPHIL)
James Rosa (LWVI)	Sheridan Lea (UF CAPHIL)
Karen Schebler (Citizen)	Grace Calhoun (UF CAPHIL)
Bruce Goldberger (Florida Department of Health)	Sherry Groover (Citizen)

A MOTION WAS MADE, SECONDED, AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY FOR THE COMMISSION TO APPROVE THE AGENDA.

A MOTION WAS MADE, SECONDED, AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY FOR THE COMMISSION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE FEBRUARY 4, 2025 MEDICAL EXAMINERS COMMISSION MEETING.

ISSUE NUMBER 1 & 2: INTRODUCTIONS:

- New MEC Staff Member: Director Brown introduced new MEC Staff Member, Ashley Bullard to the Commission.
- New MEC Attorney: Dr. Kirkland introduced the new MEC Attorney, Natalie Bielby to the Commission.

ISSUE NUMBER 3: INFORMATIONAL ITEMS:

- Status Report: MEC Appointments: Dr. Kirkland informed the Commission that Nick Cox has stepped down from his role as a Commission member as a designee for the Attorney General's Office. Attorney General James Uthmeier has appointed Brian Fernandes as the representative for the Attorney General's Office to the Commission.
- District 8 Medical Examiner Vacancy: Joshua Stephany, M.D., informed the Commission that the District 8 District Medical Examiner's position is still vacant and has no news to report. Dr. Jon Thogmartin will continue to provide coverage. Dr. Thogmartin advised that Alachua County has two critical items to address before advertising the District 8 Medical Examiner position.
- 2024 Interim Drug Report: Ms. Megan Neel informed the Commission that drug data has been completed and just awaiting final approval before publishing. Ms. Neel advised the Commission that it should be published soon.
- 2024 Annual Drug Report: Ms. Megan Neel informed the Commission that drug data has been received, complied and going through the quality assurance committee for review. Ms. Neel advised the Commission that it should be published early summer.
- 2024 Annual Workload Report: Ms. Megan Neel reminded the Commission that due date for the 2024 data is May 31, 2025. Ms. Neel advised if the districts have an issue, to reach out to her. Commission staff is aware there will be some pending cases but that can be resolved later.
- 2024 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program Status Update: Ms. Ashley Williams informed the Commission that funds have been released and the FDLE Grants unit is working on reimbursements. Ms. Williams reminded the districts to make their purchases and get the reimbursement forms submitted.
- 2025 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant Program Status Update: Ms. Ashley Williams advised that 14 proposals were received for the 2025 Paul Coverdell Grant. Ms. Williams advised that there has been no indication on if the 2025 Paul Coverdell will be issued.
- 2025 Legislative Session Update: FDLE Legal Counsel Natalie Bielby, informed the Commission of bills of interest to the Commission and the medical examiner community. Ms. Bielby informed the Commission that House Bill 231 (Public Records/ Medical Examiners) which establishes a public records exemption for personal identifying and location information of current and former medical examiners, along with their spouses and children has been withdrawn from consideration.

ISSUE NUMBER 4: REAPPOINTMENT NOMINATIONS FOR DISTRICT 8, 10, 12, AND 14 AND ASSESSMENTS FOR DISTRICT 9, 11, 13 AND 25

The Commission reviewed the constituent surveys for the reappointments of District Medical Examiners in District 8 (Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union Counties), District 10 (Hardee, Highlands, and Polk Counties), District 12 (DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota Counties), and District 14 (Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, and Washington Counties).

The Commission also reviewed the survey assessments for District 3 (Dixie County), District 9 (Orange County), District 11 (Miami-Dade County), District 13 (Hillsborough County), and District 25 (Osceola County). District 3 receives medical examiner services through contractual agreement with District 8. Districts 9, 11, 13, and 25 are home rule districts.

With constituents overwhelmingly responding with approval for the district medical examiners in districts 8, 10, 12, and 14, the Commission held a lump vote for the districts up for reappointment.

WITH NO FURTHER DISCUSSION, MRS. SHEPPARD MADE A MOTION TO APPROVE THE REAPPOINTMENTS OF THE INCUMBENT MEDICAL EXAMINERS IN DISTRICTS 8, 10, 12, AND 14. THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY THAT THE REAPPOINTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS OF DISTRICT 8, 10, 12, AND 14 MEDICAL EXAMINERS BE FORWARDED TO THE GOVERNOR'S APPOINTMENTS OFFICE.

ISSUE NUMBER 5: UNIDENTIFIED DECEASED INITIATIVE:

Ms. Ashley Williams read into record Cold Case Identification from District 13:

On October 15, 1997, the decomposed body of an adult Hispanic/white male was found prone in 1-2 inches of water under a railway track in a canal at 43rd St & 7th Ave in Tampa. The body was found along with personal belongings to include Tampa General Hospital phenobarbital prescription, Resident Alien Card, and Social Security Card. All belongings were labeled as belonging to Rodolfo Barcenas-Guerrero DOB 05/20/1958. The cause and manner of death were ruled undetermined. Partial fingerprints were obtained; however, nothing was on file with Tampa Police Department. In November 1997, the Mexican Consulate was contacted to attempt identification and/or family contact. In January 1998, the Mexican Consulate advised they were unsuccessful at either attempt. Only an mtDNA STR profile was able to be obtained for CODIS and the decedent was buried at Chapel Hill Cemetery Lot Lakeside 67B Space Z as Unidentified. In August 2024, the US Customs and Border Patrol was contacted for further ID attempt with the above information. In September 2024, CBP was able to provide a report with possible sister. The sister was contacted who confirmed that her brother, Rodolfo Barcenas Guerrero, has been missing. Partial ante-mortem prints were received and attempted identification with the partial post-mortem prints. Due to the condition of both sets of prints, no ID was able to be established. The Mexican Consulate was contacted and was able to provide a buccal swab of the sister in Mexico. In April 2025, the buccal swab of the sister and a premolar from the decedent were submitted to the Pinellas County Forensic Lab for direct comparison. On May 1, 2025, the DNA report was received which advised the DNA profiles were consistent with being from full biological siblings.

ISSUE NUMBER 6: OTHRAM INFO AND FUNDING OPTIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS AND MEDICAL EXAMINERS

Sales Director Gabriel Feltner presented the Commission with a presentation on Othram forensic laboratories. Mr. Feltner informed the Commission on the services that are provided by Othram and how they benefit medical examiners, along with how to apply for the services.

Deputy Director Leigh Clark of FDLE's Forensic Services gave an update on the Missing and Unidentified Human Remains (MUHR) Program and the Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy Grant (FIGG) Program. Ms. Clark gave an in-depth presentation on the expanded services that are being offered, the criteria for participation, and the FIGG-specific funding sources. The grant is open to local and state law enforcement agencies, Florida medical examiners offices, perpetrator cases, homicide victims, and unidentified human remains doe cases. Ms. Clark further explained the requirements for the FIGG Program submission process.

ISSUE NUMBER 7: EMERGING DRUGS UPDATE

Bruce Goldberger, Ph.D., provided the Commission with an update on new drug trends. Dr. Goldberger informed the Commission that laboratories are seeing a decrease in fentanyl, cocaine, methamphetamine, cathinones and xylazine. However, there has been a noticeable increase in cocaine only cases and methamphetamine only cases. There is still a small number of carfentanil cases across the state at a constant level. Also, there are two emerging cathinone's, N-Isopropyl Butylone and N,N-Dimethylpentylone. The newest cathinone that has been identified in postmortems is α -PiHP, mostly seen in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami- Dade counties. There has been an increase in ketamine associated deaths. Ketamine is now available as a prescription drug to treat depression but still available as a club drug particularly in Miami-Dade County.

Furthermore, Dr. Goldberger informed the Commission that the toxicology laboratory directors continue to meet bimonthly to discuss the prevalence and emergence of drugs in the state of Florida. Participants of the meeting include representatives from the MEC, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Florida Department of Health, and the Office of Statewide Intelligence.

ISSUE NUMBER 8: OTHER BUSINESS

Bruce Goldberger, Ph.D., informed the Commission of a new project that the Department of Health has established. The Department of Health recognizes the critical role that Florida's Medical Examiner districts play in collecting and reporting death investigation data which supports health programs, education, and research, and most importantly, helps prevent avoidable deaths. As such, Department of Health is exploring opportunities to make medical examiner's data collection and reporting more efficient for all stakeholders who rely on this information. To establish an understanding of existing medical examiner's district systems, tools, and processes, consulting partners, North Highland and Ruvos, will contact each district to request some documentation and schedule a 90-minute interview to be conducted during June 2025.

With no further business to come before the Commission, the meeting was adjourned at 11:01 A.M.