

Oppose Risky Privatization of the Cook County Medical Examiner's Toxicology Lab

The Cook County Medical Examiner's Office (MEO) operates a Toxicology Lab that plays a key role in identifying the cause of death by testing and analyzing samples for the presence of foreign substances like drugs or poisons. Under the County's proposed FY 17 budget, the MEO's Toxicology Lab would be privatized, reportedly to one of only two certified private labs in the country.

While the MEO claims this scheme is based on a cost saving study, they have refused to share that study. In fact, the County is unlikely to achieve long term savings when there are so few available vendors.

The proposed budget would eliminate 18 of the 22 positions in the Toxicology Lab, leaving four staff to maintain a 365-day-a-year operation. Two lab assistants and two toxicologists would oversee the work of the vendor, conduct immediate alcohol and carbon monoxide tests, and ship all other samples to the private lab. The workload and scheduling are not feasible.

The question of cost and feasibility aside, privatizing Toxicology would harm MEO's operations. Private labs won't perform at the level of the in-house staff:

- With privatization, County pathology doctors will lose the ability to consult with toxicologists across the hall when they have questions about interpretation or what drugs they may or may not pursue. County toxicologists pursue tests beyond what doctors have requested if they see a need. The private lab will simply test for what they are asked to test for. This will mean fewer definitive test results and more unanswered questions for families, law enforcement and public health.
- Currently Toxicology answers calls from bereaved families on a daily basis. With privatization, families will no longer be able to call with questions about how the toxicology results impacted the life of their loved one or with questions about DNA requests.
- While law enforcement can pick up the phone and talk to County Lab staff about their rush needs or share new information, that won't happen with a private lab.
- Toxicology staff will no longer be available to provide depositions or testify in court, a critical need for law enforcement. And the disruption in the chain of custody caused by shipping samples across the country could become an issue in criminal cases.
- The Toxicology Division will no longer be able to monitor trends and report this information, a loss of key public health information.

Toxicology added eight staff in the past year, investing in their training and development. In addition, considerable effort has been invested in helping the ME's Office regain accreditation and in bringing new equipment on line. These improvements have occurred at the same time that there has been an increased workload due to increases in homicides and drug overdoses. Through it all, the Lab maintained the standard of timeliness set by the ME.

Less than five years ago the Medical Examiner's Office was the focus of very negative media headlines when cuts to staff and equipment created a crisis. The MEO just regained its accreditation this year, because of investments in staff. Policymakers should not allow privatization to send the office back into crisis.