

# **Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office**

# **2019**

## **"March" Report**

### **Annual Report Covering the Period of January 1-December 31, 2018**

**Prepared by Adam Covach, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner**

**Released April 26, 2019**



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## **OUR MISSION**

The mission of the Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's office is to determine the cause and manner of death in those deaths that fall under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner (as outlined in WI State Statute 979.01).

The Medical Examiner's Office staff applies their knowledge and experience in the field of death investigation and forensic pathology to perform comprehensive, professional investigations, which clarify the circumstances surrounding these deaths. Through the identification, documentation and accurate interpretation of relevant forensic scientific information, the Medical Examiner's Office may provide information for use in criminal and civil litigation. This information may also serve to protect public health and safety by identifying contagious diseases; by identifying environmental hazards in the workplace, home, and community; and, by tracking local mortality trends (trends in homicides, suicides, motor vehicle fatalities, drug and alcohol related deaths, etc.).

As part of their investigation, they may collect evidence, obtain laboratory specimens, and make positive identifications of decedents.

The Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office is also committed to providing service to other Wisconsin counties, through the performance of forensic autopsies, assistance with training and education, and consultation on medicolegal issues. It is the ultimate goal of the office to lead the way in standardizing, improving and professionalizing death investigation in the state of Wisconsin.

## **2019 STAFF LISTING**

Adam Covach, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner  
 Dan Krieser, Operations Manager  
 Sue Voigt, Administrative Assistant  
 Katelyn Lindsley, Investigator/Forensic Autopsy Assistant\*  
 David Lefeber, Investigator/Forensic Autopsy Assistant  
 Vicki Hoch, Investigator  
 Nancy Preder, Investigator  
 Heather Madell, Investigator\*\*

\* Leaving at the end of April 2019 (See Summary)

\*\* Leaving at the end of May 2019 (See Summary)

Starting at the end of April and early May, 2019:

Sarah Hoefer, Investigator/Forensic Autopsy Assistant  
 Christopher Shea, Investigator

Forensic pathologists employed by the Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office are board certified by the American Board of Pathology (ABP). Being board certified by the ABP means that a pathologist has completed training in anatomic, clinical, and

forensic pathology, and has passed the board examinations given by the ABP to ensure competence in this field.

All of the death investigators employed by the Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office are either certified by the American Board of Medico-legal Death Investigation (ABMDI) or undergoing certification. Being ABMDI-certified indicates that an investigator has been formally trained in death investigation and has met the standards of the ABMDI. The ABMDI is recognized and supported by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME).

### **2018 Overview**

2018 was a year of challenges and transitions for the office. In April of 2018, P. Douglas Kelley stepped down as the chief medical examiner; however, to facilitate the completion of reports before he left, the office stopped accepting autopsies from client counties beginning in early February, and stopped performing autopsies entirely, including for Fond du Lac County at the end of February. Dr. Adam Covach had accepted a position as the associate medical examiner in November of 2017, but would be unable to start until after his fellowship training was completed. This means that from the end of February through the end of August, 2018, the office had to send all Fond du Lac County cases to the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office and received no income from consultation autopsies.

In the meantime, a search was initiated for a new Chief Medical Examiner. Dr. Eimad Zakariya initially accepted the position in May of 2018 and was confirmed by the county board shortly thereafter, but ultimately declined the position and the search was restarted. In June, Dr. Erik Mitchell was recruited to the position of Chief Medical Examiner, confirmed by the board, and started in July of 2018. Due to a delay in obtaining his medical license from the state of Wisconsin, Dr. Mitchell was unable to perform any autopsies for approximately the first two months of his employment, but this issue resolved in September.

Dr. Adam Covach began working for the office at the end of August, and was able to immediately start performing autopsies. He took and passed his forensic pathology boards in early September. Our former client counties were notified that we were once again accepting cases, and outreach efforts were started. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the client counties were slow in coming back, and several informed us they were going to continue to utilize Milwaukee County's Office for that service. In light of the new reality of having two forensic pathologists in an office that had the caseload that could really only support one, Dr. Mitchell resigned as Chief in October and returned to Kansas. Dr. Covach then accepted the position of Chief and was confirmed at the end of October. In an effort to attract clients back, our fees for performing autopsies were lowered and additional outreach efforts were performed. Since then, growth has been slow and steady, and as of the writing of this report, autopsy services have been performed for 15 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and one county in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Other personnel changes include the retirements of investigators Fred Stansbury and Mike Zankle and the resignation of investigator Tom O'Connor.

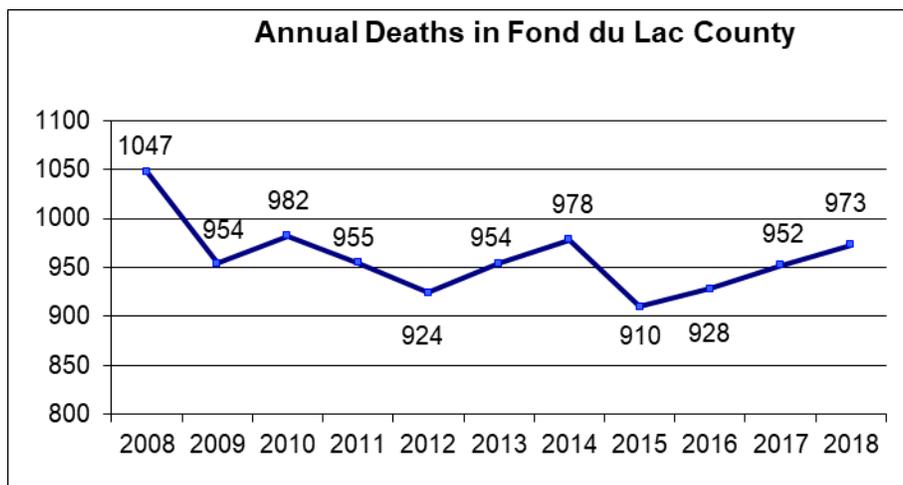
The entire staff of the Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office are members of the Wisconsin Coroner's and Medical Examiner's Association (WCMEA). Dr. Covach is a member of the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the College of American Pathologists (CAP). Dr. Covach also serves on NAME's finance and ad hoc professional development committees. In October, Dr. Covach attended NAME's annual conference in West Palm Beach, FL and presented a poster on a case presentation he had during fellowship.

The office remains an active member of the Pediatric Death Review Committee for Fond du Lac County. This committee reviews pediatric deaths in Fond du Lac County and addresses issues of safety and injury prevention for our younger citizens.

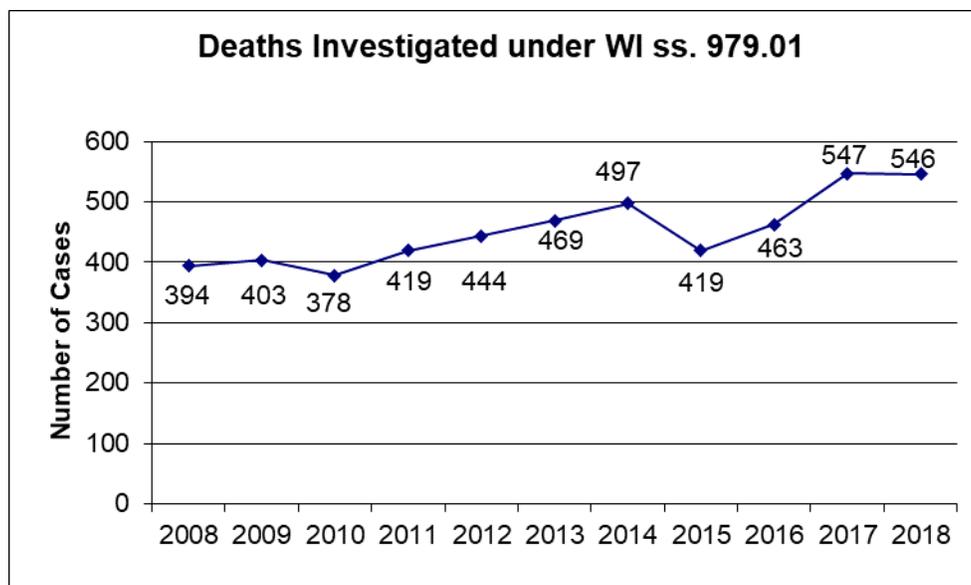
In addition, the office is an active member of the newly formed Suicide Death Review Team. This team reviews suicides that occur in Fond du Lac County, the life situations of the decedent, and any other relevant information in an effort to achieve the goal of zero suicides in this county.

### **Case Statistics**

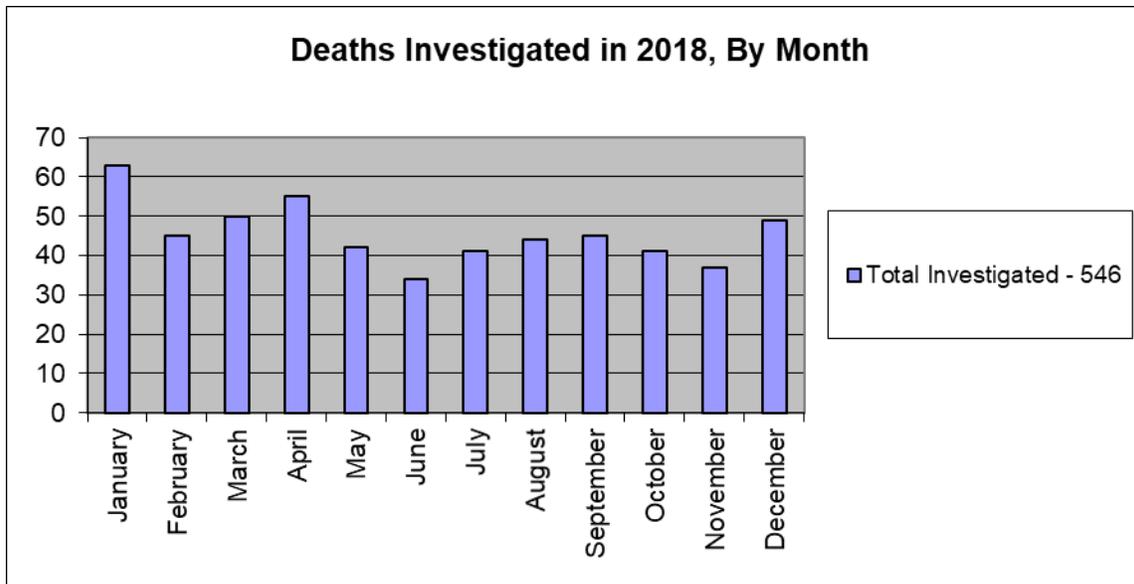
There were 973 deaths in Fond du lac County in 2018. This comprises approximately 0.9% of the population (102,548 by 2017 statistics). This mortality rate is not dissimilar from that found in other Wisconsin counties, both populous and rural. The annual mortality rate for FDL County has averaged 951 deaths over the last 9 years. In the 5 years prior to that (2005-2009), the average annual mortality rate in FDL County was 1038.



In 2017, the FDL County Medical Examiner's Office investigated 546 deaths, 56.1% of the total deaths occurring in Fond du Lac County. This represents an insignificant decrease in the number of cases investigated when compared to the record setting 2017, which in itself was a large rise compared to 2016. Although the annual death rate in FDL County has decreased from what it was eleven years ago, the number of cases investigated is holding steady. In fact, the death rate of the last four years has been trending upward, and it is foreseeable that this will continue to be the trend case in 2019 and beyond.



The number of deaths investigated per month in 2018 was between 37 and 63, with over 40 investigations conducted every month except June and November.



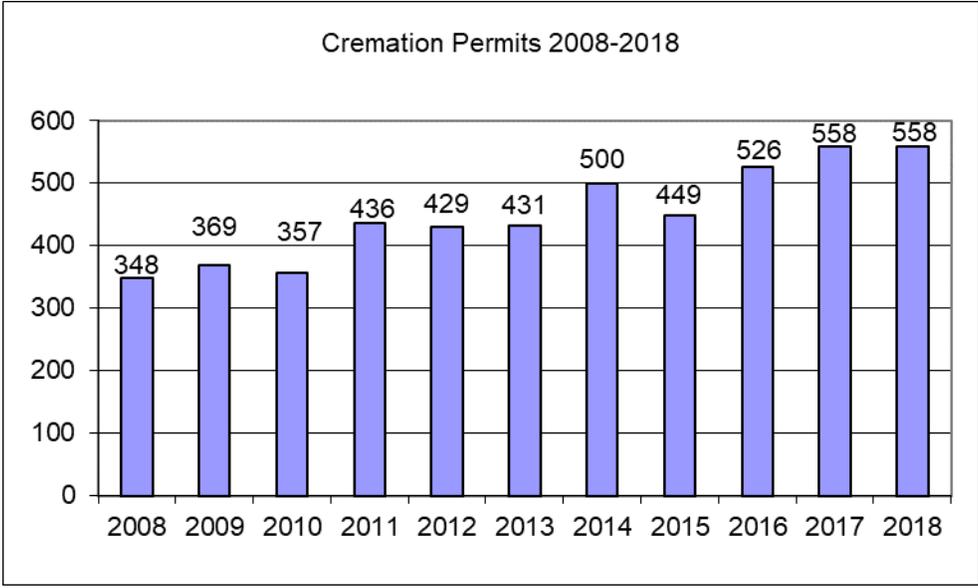
Of the 546 investigations opened in 2018, a scene investigation was undertaken in 175 of them (32%). In these cases, it was determined that a scene response by a forensic investigator--and, in some cases, a forensic pathologist--was necessary to adequately collect information needed to establish jurisdiction, to determine the cause and manner of death and to best understand the circumstances surrounding these deaths.

Of the 546 cases investigated by the FDL MEO, jurisdiction was assumed in 159 (29%) of them (based on criteria outlined in Wisconsin state statute 979.01). In assuming jurisdiction, the Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office performs a complete investigation, determines the cause and manner of death and signs a death certificate.

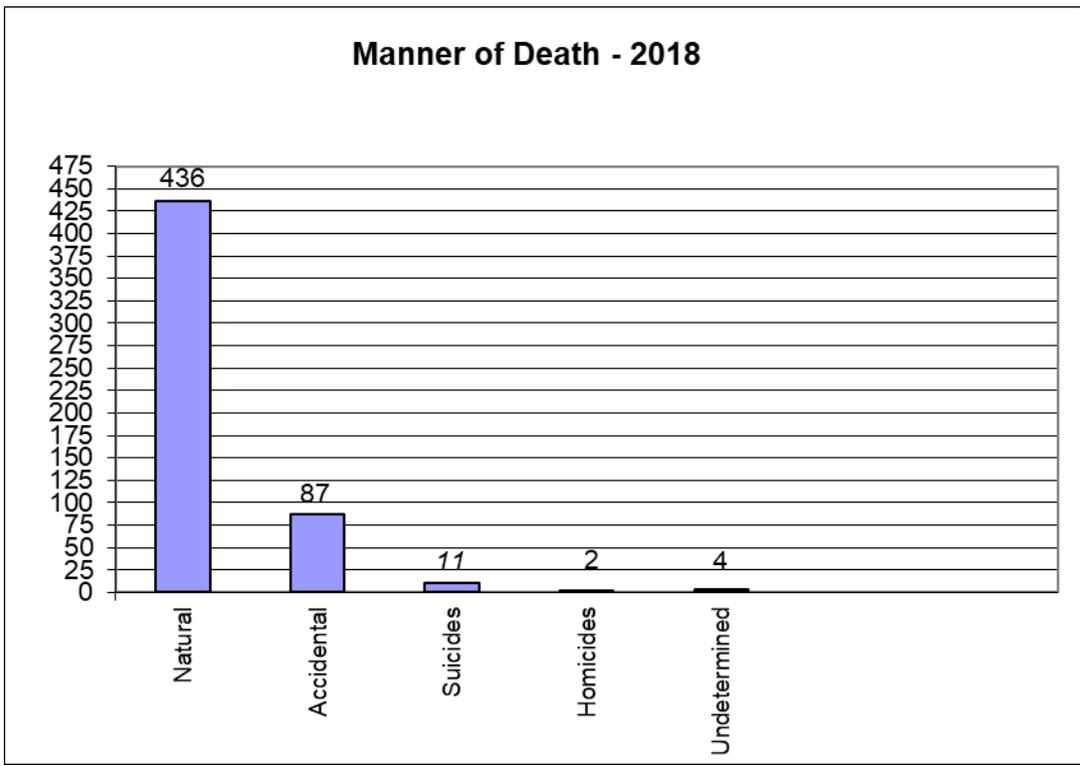
### **Cremations and Disinterments**

A total of 558 cremation permits were issued in 2018. This is tied with 2017 for the highest number of annual cremation examinations performed in the history of the office (with 2016 representing the second highest annual number). While cremations have been trending steadily upwards over the past 10 years (see chart below), these numbers are not necessarily dependent on population or death statistics, but on the unpredictable, individual preferences of the decedents and/or their next of kin.

There was one disinterment issued in 2018.



**Manners of Death in FDL County, 2018**



Of the 546 death investigations performed in 2018, 6 cases were found to fall under the jurisdiction of another county Coroner/Medical Examiner’s office; therefore, the FDL MEO referred jurisdiction to those agencies. Since the certification of death for these

cases was the responsibility of another county, the manners of death for these cases are not included in the Fond du Lac County statistics. There were no cases of reported non-human remains in 2018.

Of the remaining 540 cases investigated by the office, 436 were natural deaths (81%). This percentage is consistent with the average percentage of deaths investigated over the prior ten-year period that were certified as “natural” deaths. Therefore, based on the 2018 statistics, 89% of the 973 deaths in Fond du Lac County were natural deaths. Put another way, there were 104 people who died of non-natural or undetermined circumstances in 2018.

**Accidents:** There was an increase in accidental deaths in Fond du Lac County in 2018, with a total of 87. There were 60 accidental deaths in 2017, with 71, 48, and 60 accidental deaths occurring in the 3 years prior to that. The 87 accidental deaths in 2017 includes 49 deaths resulting from falls in persons of advanced age and/or disease, which contributed to and hastened their deaths. [The FDL MEO considers any death in which an accidental traumatic event contributed to or hastened the death of a person an “accidental” death, irrespective of age or the presence of terminal disease.] Within this group of 49 accidental deaths resulting from falls, 26 were due to complications of hip and leg fractures, 5 were from complications of neck and spine fractures, 1 followed an arm fracture, 12 were from complications of head trauma, 3 from rib fractures, and 2 had unspecified injuries. The age range of these 49 deaths was from 56-103 years of age with an average age of 87.1 years.

Of the 87 accidental deaths in 2018, 18 were due to injuries related to “vehicular” collisions. Sixteen of the eighteen were due to motor vehicle crashes involving cars and/or trucks. There were 2 motorcycle fatalities in 2018, compared to no deaths in 2017 and 3 deaths in 2016. There were no pedestrian, ATV, or snowmobile fatalities in 2018. There have been no boat-related fatalities in the last 7 years and no fire-related deaths in FDL County since 2010. In 2018, there were 3 drowning deaths in Fond du Lac. Three FDL County residents were found to have died from accidental asphyxia in 2018: two from choking on food and one an infant who was sleeping in an unsafe sleeping environment. Two people died as a result of a fall from a significant height: one from a ladder and one fell off a cliff. One person died as a result of burns sustained as a result of having a cigarette lighter near to supplemental oxygen.

**Motor Vehicular-related Fatalities:** There were 16 deaths from motor vehicle accidents in 2018, resulting from 12 separate crashes (2 were double fatalities). These deaths included 4 females (2 of whom were drivers) and 12 males (10 of whom were drivers), ranging in age from 25 to 77 years. In 4 of the deaths the decedents were over 60, 2 were in their 50s, 2 were in their 40s, 4 were in their 30s, and 4 were in their 20s. By contrast in 2017, there were 8 deaths over the age of 60.

Three of the twelve crashes resulting in four deaths occurred during the same winter storm in February. Two crashes occurred in March, 1 in April, 2 in September, 3 in October, 1 in November, and 2 in December. Weather conditions were cited as a factor

in four of the crashes (slippery/icy roads). Nine of the twelve crashes occurred during daylight hours. All of the crashes occurred on highways (three on Hwy 23, and one each on SR-44, SR-49, Hwy 141, I-45, Cty B, Cty D, Cty G, Cty Q, and Cty V).

Of the 2018 car/truck fatalities, twelve of the 16 deaths were drivers. Seven of the 16 victims were wearing seatbelts at the time of the crash, 5 were unbelted, and 2 had an unknown seatbelt status. Two of the fatalities were riding a motorcycle. Six of the fatalities were found to be intoxicated at the time of the crash, with three victims having both alcohol and marijuana metabolites on toxicology, one had only alcohol, one had only marijuana, and one had prescribed benzodiazepines.

Four of the fatal crashes involved overcorrecting a vehicle, crossing the centerline, and getting in a "t-bone" collision. Two crashes crossed the centerline for unspecified reasons. Three fatal crashes involved losing control of a vehicle and hitting a tree (of these, one died because of health consequences induced by injuries sustained during the crash a few weeks later). Two drivers were travelling at high speeds, lost control, and ran off the road. One crash involved running into a garbage truck that was backing up. One driver ran into a semi-trailer. One driver had the right of way and struck a car that went through a stop sign. The motorcycle fatality involved running into a tractor that was on the highway while the biker was attempting to pass a car.

Toxicity Deaths: The number of accidental deaths due to "drug toxicity" in 2018 was 13, an increase from the 9 deaths in 2017 and lower than the 14 deaths in 2016. Four of the decedents were 50 years or older, two were in their 40s, three decedents were in their 30s, and four were in their 20s. Eight of the thirteen deceased were male. Seven of the twelve deaths occurred within the city limits of Fond du Lac, three occurred in Ripon, two occurred in North Fond du Lac, and one occurred in Waupun. All of the decedents were residents of FDL County. Five of the 13 deaths resulted from use of drugs prescribed to them. Evidence of illicit drug use was found at four of the death scenes. The scenes involved personal residences in 9 of the deaths, a friend's home in 2 of the cases, a public park in 1 case, and a police squad car in 1 death. Eight decedents had a reported history of prior drug use.

Of the 13 toxicity deaths with an accidental manner in 2018, 4 were certified as "multidrug toxicity", meaning that more than one drug was detected in the decedents' blood at the time of death. Opioids were involved in 6 of the 13 deaths. Heroin was a contributing factor in only one of the deaths. Fentanyl was a contributing factor in 2 of the 13 deaths. Other opioids involved in the 2018 drug deaths included methadone (one case), hydrocodone (one case), and buprenorphine (two cases). Three cases involved alprazolam. One case involved the suprathereapeutic use of gabapentin. Four cases were positive for cocaine and two had methamphetamine. Three of the thirteen deaths involved acute intoxication while in a dangerous environment where it is believed the decedent lost consciousness and died. Two of these involved drowning in a bathtub (one decedent was positive for cocaine and alprazolam and the other had methamphetamine and marijuana) while a third died from hypothermia while acutely intoxicated with alcohol.

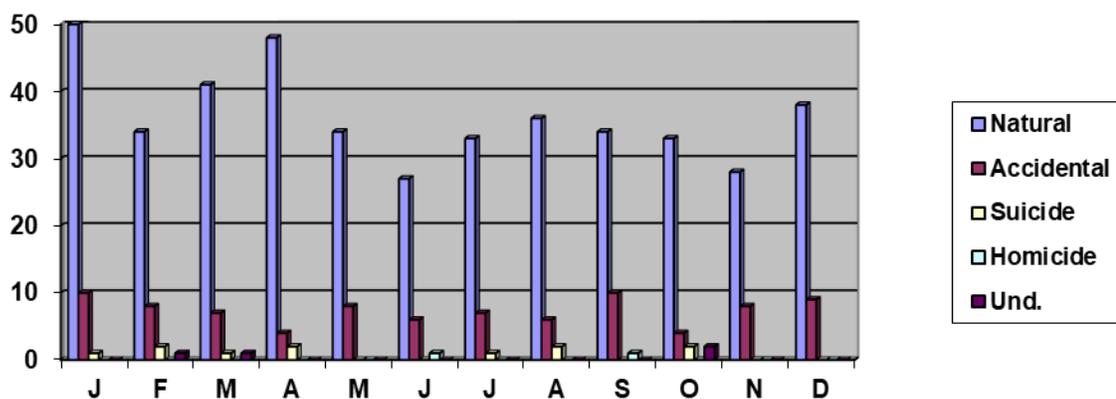
**Suicides:** The number of FDL County suicidal deaths in 2018 was 11, a decrease from 2017 (21 deaths) and 2016 (19 deaths). This suicide rate represents a decrease from the upward trend of the previous four years and is below the ten year average from 2008-2017 of 15 suicides per year.

Ten of the 11 decedents were Fond du Lac County residents. The same 10 who were FDL County residents committed the suicidal actions in the person's residence or on their property. The methods employed included gunshot wounds (4 deaths), asphyxia due to hanging (2 deaths), drug toxicity (4 deaths), and carbon monoxide exposure from a generator running in an enclosed space (1 death). Seven of the 11 decedents were male. The ages of the deceased ranged from 23 to 69 years of age. Seven of the decedents had a history of drug and/or alcohol abuse; four had prior diagnoses of depression or bipolar disorder; and, four decedents had a history of prior suicide attempts.

**Homicides:** There were two homicides in Fond du Lac County in 2018. One was a case of blunt force trauma to the head which is still under investigation. One was a case that is a sequelae of blunt force injury to the head after being beaten with a baseball bat decades prior in Michigan.

Four "undetermined" manner of death rulings were made in 2018.

### **Manner of Death by Month 2018**

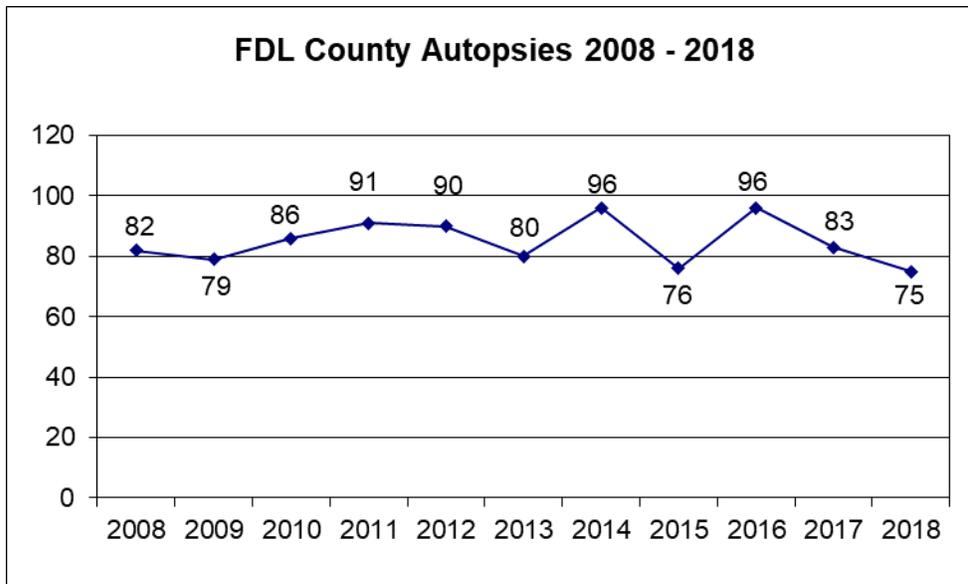


In 2018, the months with the highest number of accidental deaths (10) were January and September, with 9 accidental deaths occurring in December. With regard to suicides, the highest number of deaths (2) occurred in February, April, August, and October.

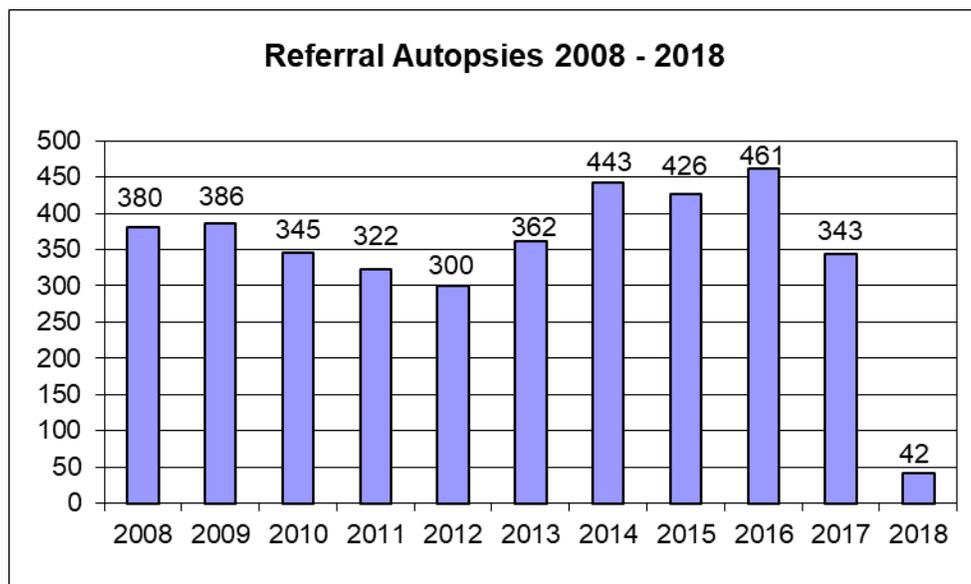
### **Autopsy Service**

In 2018, 75 autopsies and 21 external examinations were performed in the course of FDL County death investigations. This means that autopsies were performed in 47% of the 159

cases in which jurisdiction was assumed. The number of annual autopsies performed on FDL County deaths in the previous 10 years has ranged from 76 (in 2015) to 96 (in 2016 and 2014), with an average of 86 FDL autopsies performed per year.



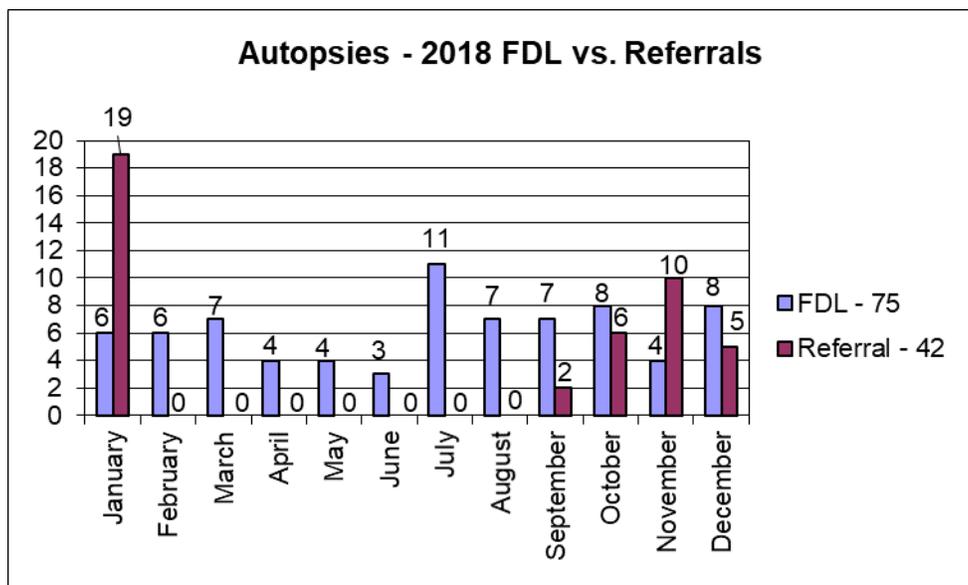
In 2018, 42 referral autopsies were performed for other counties. A total of 117 autopsies were performed in the FDL County autopsy suites in 2018. A total of 39 autopsies were sent to the Milwaukee County ME Office either during the period the FDL MEO was unable to perform autopsies or when Dr. Covach was unavailable.



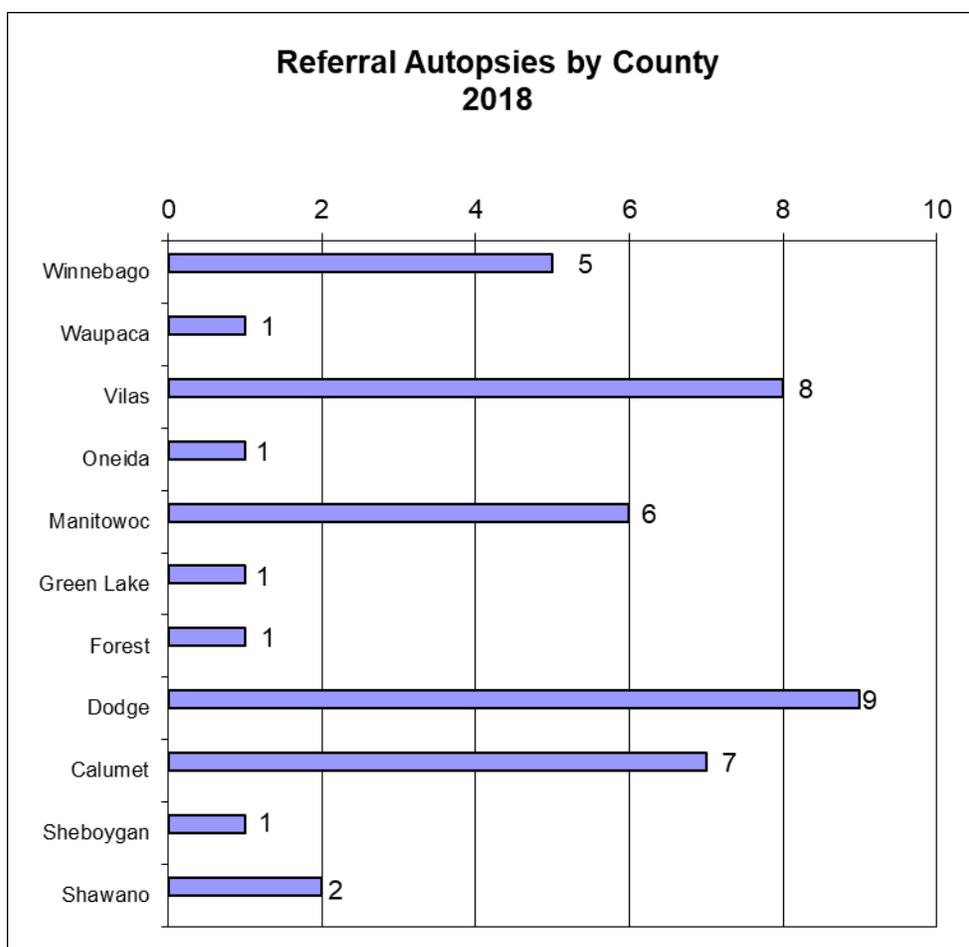
The number of referral autopsies performed in 2018 represents a marked decrease when compared to the previous ten years (a total of 42 performed compared to a yearly average

of 377 for the previous ten years). The reason for this is not having a forensic pathologist able to perform autopsies for approximately 7 months of the year. In addition, for various reasons including budgetary concerns and election cycles, many client county offices were either unable or slow to transition back to utilizing the FDL MEO for autopsy services.

In 2018, the number of FDL County autopsies performed monthly either by the office or Milwaukee County has ranged from 3 to 11, with an average of 6 FDL autopsies per month. The number of referral autopsies performed monthly ranged from 0 to 19, with a mean of 4 autopsies per month. In months where the number of referral autopsies was greater than zero, the average number of referral autopsies was 8 per month. The total monthly autopsy rate performed either within the office or consulted out was between 3 and 25 cases, with an average of 10 autopsies per month. The average monthly autopsy rate in 2017 was 36 cases per month which were performed by a single forensic pathologist. It should be noted that the numbers for this calendar year are skewed by the unavailability of a forensic pathologist able to perform autopsies for seven months of the year.



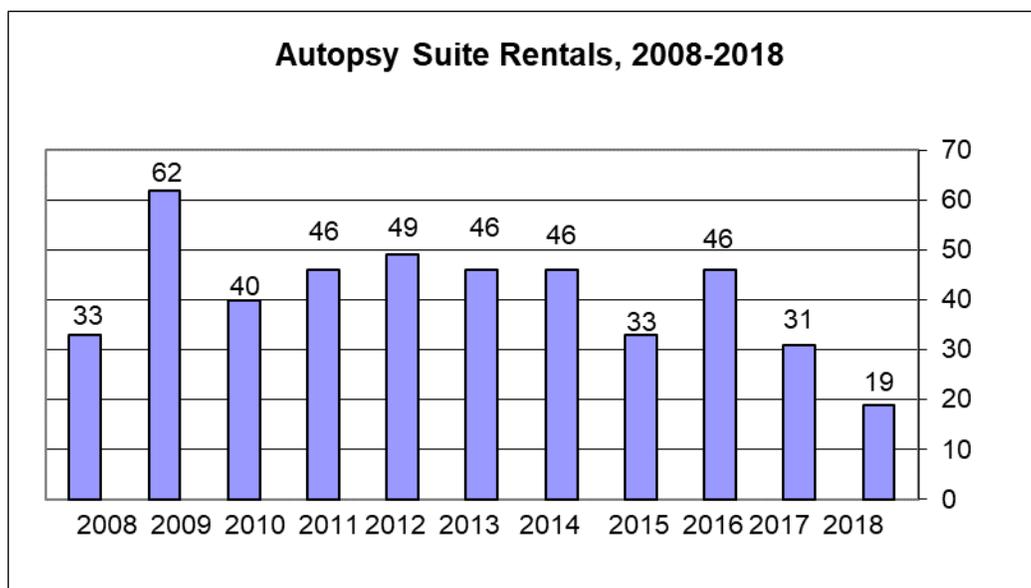
Referral autopsies were performed for 11 other counties in 2018. After the office reopened in August, a total of 8 outside counties sent cases during 2018. Of these 8 counties that have returned, 5 regularly bring their cases to the FDL MEO for forensic autopsy, while the others only utilize the office's services on occasion.



There is no reliable way to predict the referral autopsy caseload in any given month or year, because of the variation in cases handled by the referral counties and the individual philosophies of those Coroners and Medical Examiners in determining which cases to perform autopsies on. Dodge County (9 cases) and Vilas County (8 cases) accounted for the most referral autopsies performed by the FDL MEO, followed by Calumet County (7 cases), Manitowoc County (6 cases), and Winnebago County (5 cases). Of these top 5 referral counties, only Winnebago County has completely stopped utilizing the FDL MEO for autopsy services, while Dodge County regularly sends us deaths that occur in custody.

## Autopsy Suite Rental

The FDL MEO autopsy suites, when not in use, are made available to Wisconsin tissue procurement agencies that perform cornea, bone and tissue procurements. In 2018, tissue procurement organizations utilized the FDL County MEO autopsy suites 19 times.



## Summary

Annum 2018 was a challenging year for the FDL MEO. With the autopsy service completely closing at the end of February, autopsies were not performed from March through the end of August, severely impacting and skewing not only autopsy numbers, but also the financial bottom line of the office. It was initially anticipated that most, if not all, of our client counties would return to us with the office reopening in August. While many have, some of our most historically populous referral counties have not returned to us, at least not entirely. Part of the reason for slow client return is likely a reflection of internal staffing transitions in their respective offices and the need for new coroners/MEs to start their position before changing who performs their autopsies. Since the office started accepting autopsies, as of the writing of this report, we have performed autopsy services for 15 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and one county in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Additional outreach efforts to try and attract more case volume is, and will continue to be, one of the key goals of 2019.

In addition, staff turnover has been a challenge for the office in both 2018 and the start of 2019. Fred Stansbury, on-call investigator, and Mike Zankle, daytime investigator/autopsy assistant both retired in the latter half of 2018. In addition, Tom O'Connor, on-call investigator, resigned his position in October. Early in 2019, Heather Maddell, on-call investigator, resigned to move closer to both family and her day job. Katelyn Lindsley, daytime investigator/autopsy assistant, also informed me of her desire to resign to allow her to start her own business. While the FDL MEO is missing and will

miss their expertise and experience, we also thank them for their years of service to the office and the people of the county and wish them the best in their future endeavors.

In reaction to the above retirements and resignations, searches were begun to fill those positions. To that end, Nancy Preder started training as an on-call death investigator in April, and is expected to be able to function independently in early Summer 2019. Christopher Shea will start as an on-call investigator in May 2019 and is bringing with him more than 15 years' worth of investigative experience from the Winnebago County Coroner's Office. After an initial orientation to how the FDL MEO operates, he is expected to be able to hit the ground running. Sarah Hofer was formerly employed as an on-call investigator, but resigned in 2016. She has accepted the position of daytime investigator and began April 29, 2019. She brings with her Quality Improvement experience from past jobs, and we are looking forward to having her as a member of the team.

In spite of the above challenges, in 2018 the FDL MEO investigated 546 deaths, six of which were deferred to a different jurisdiction. Of these 540 remaining deaths, autopsies were performed on 75 decedents (39 of which were performed by the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office). The manners of death for the cases we accepted jurisdiction on were 436 natural, 87 accidentals, 11 suicides, 2 homicides, and 4 undetermined. For additional details, please see the corresponding section above. There were 558 cremation permits issued in 2018, which is tied for the most ever performed. In 2018, there were 42 referral autopsies referred from 11 counties. The autopsy suite was rented a total of 19 times for tissue procurement.

Looking forward, here are some of the goals for the office in 2019:

- Fully train and ABMDI certify all new staff members
- Hire an additional two on-call death investigators to ensure full coverage of all night/weekend shifts without the need for dayshift personnel to fill any gaps
- Host summer interns to increase awareness of medico-legal death investigation and provide community outreach
- Continue outreach efforts to our client counties to improve the caseload. Once growth is assured, we will be able to explore hiring a second pathologist and additional day staff
- Review office policies and procedures to bring them more in line with best/actual practice

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At this point, I need to express my gratitude and admiration for all the staff of the FDL MEO, past and present, who worked together to keep this office running during the interregnum. I am only just starting to fully comprehend the challenges they faced, which include losing a respected colleague, shifting work responsibilities, and facing an uncertain future. This office is only able to function with their continued efforts and professionalism. Without them, there is a very real possibility that I would have started in August only to find the office with its windows shuttered and the need to start

completely from scratch. Their efforts and accomplishments after Dr. Kelley left cannot be overstated.

I would also like to thank the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office for assisting us with performing autopsies while the office lacked a forensic pathologist, providing backup while I am away on vacation, and serving as a sounding board for difficult cases.

Lastly, I would like to thank Allen Buechel, Erin Gerred, and all the members of the Public Safety Committee for their support during this transitional year. I know that the bottom line from this office has not been pleasant to look at but I believe that 2018 will be a small blip in the history of this successful office and am looking forward to our continued rebuilding.

Respectfully Submitted,

Adam Covach, M.D.  
Chief Medical Examiner  
Fond du Lac County Medical Examiner's Office