



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES – AUGUST 25, 2026 DAN ROMEO, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Block, Ms. Denton, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Burtis, Mr. Romeo; also see attached

Chair Romeo called the meeting to order at 10:30 a.m., and the previous meeting's minutes were approved.

1. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH: Dr. Kathryn Anderson, Commissioner; Rane Ho, Director of Laboratories; James Sullivan, Vital Records Manager

a. **INFORMATIONAL:** Overview of the Center for Forensic Sciences

- Division has 5 sections, provides 6 disciplines; 37 total staff, including the director, split between the latent print section, the firearms section, the drug chemistry section (which also covers fire debris analysis and controlled substances), the digital evidence section, and the forensic biology and DNA section

Drug Chemistry Section:

- Oldest section, established about 26 years ago
- Provides controlled substances and fire debris analysis
- Supervised by Samuel VanDee, with 24 to 25 years of experience as a drug chemist; supervises four forensic chemists
- Last year processed over 220 items, about 142 of which contained fentanyl, includes about 10,000 to 15,000 exhibit or individual items
- Routinely receives about 400 cases a year, comprising about 1,500 individual items
- Counted about 43,000 items last year, all done by hand, no counter or robotics involved
- Performed over 8,500 examinations to verify the first and second tests come back to the same result
- Provides services to over 20 law enforcement agencies and the District Attorney's Office in the county
- Does not currently provide services to out-of-county agencies; used to at some point; currently have a backlog; plans to resume once caught up
- Fire debris analysis, about 20 cases a year

Firearms Section:

- Supervised by Justine Kreso, with over 20 years with the lab; supervises one firearms technician and five firearms examiners
- Two of the five examiners are still in training, so the section is running at about 60% capacity
- Provides serial number restoration, firearms and cartridge case comparisons, and NIBIN examinations, test firings, and operability determinations
- State law mandates a 144-hour turnaround for operability determinations, so an individual can be brought to grand jury for arraignment
- Last year, did about 300 operability reports, averaging at least one a day
- Over 380 NIBIN leads generated, using a database that correlates images of submitted cartridge cases against a number of other states in the region
- Last year had 933 requests for service and completed 789 of them, comprising about 2,400 items
- That's a similar pattern across all the disciplines and sections, the amount coming in is greater than the amount going out, but that gap is closing
- Two new trainee positions were awarded by the county in 2022 and filled about a year ago; training period is about two to three years

Latent Print Section:

- One of the oldest disciplines in forensic science
- About 1,000 service requests last year, including processing physical items submitted; latent lift cards already processed by law enforcement
- Completed about 850 of the 1,000 that came in
- Performed approximately 19,000 comparisons, from over 6,400 samples
- Only able to recover and use 1,900 of those for comparison, since not everything submitted has usable friction ridge detail
- Entered 700 prints into SAFIS, the state database that correlates friction ridge detail across cases; generated 120 hits
- Also has the capability to use the FBI database, and is looking at expanding searches into it if nothing turns up locally or in the state
- Staffed by 8 technical individuals, including the supervisor, Molly Corvo; about 2 are currently in training
- Training program is about 18 to 24 months for examiners with no prior experience

Forensic Biology & DNA Section:

- Newer section, created around 1999 to 2000
- Screens for and identifies saliva, seminal fluid, and blood, then performs DNA analysis on stains and samples that may contain DNA material
- Performs nuclear STR analysis, found in most parts of the body, as well as Y-STR analysis, used for samples that may have male DNA, most commonly in sexual assault cases

- Performs CODIS examinations and entries
- Last year had almost 800 service requests comprising about 1,200 items
- Completed just over 500 of those requests and entered 83 profiles into CODIS
- Averages about 70 CODIS hits a year
- CODIS is local to Onondaga County; only eligible profiles move up to the state level, then the federal level

Digital Evidence Section:

- Newest section; just celebrated its 20th year with the lab
- One of two digital evidence disciplines in the state that is both accredited and fully civilian
- Staffed by three digital evidence examiners, one of whom is currently in training
- Received over 150 service requests last year and completed 120
- Last year, extracted 12 terabytes of data
- Nearly all staff hold a master's degree and every staff member holds at least a bachelor's degree before joining; the lab is vetted and re-vetted by its accreditation body every other year, with a full reassessment every four years

Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Kelly: I know one thing that we've seen some changes in over recent years is discovery laws in New York State. How have we been able as a county to navigate those changes and make sure that we're able to keep up with the criminal justice system to make sure that we're investing in our public safety?
- Ms. Ho: The discovery law came about at the end of 2020 or 2021; along with the medical examiner's office, we were very fortunate that we brought that law to the members of the legislature and explained what kind of impact it would have to the laboratory and the medical examiner's office when this law came into effect, in terms of the turnaround time and being able to provide the increased, exponentially increased volume of discovery materials
 - We were very fortunate and thankful that the members of the legislature approved each of us to have a forensic records coordinator
 - She is part of a discovery team, and they receive emails advising them that there's a portal to drop records into, please collect A, B, C, and D, and we would do that
 - Most of the requests are coming in from the District Attorney's Office, but we do receive discovery requests from other law firms and agencies if they provide it to us in writing
 - Over the last five years, we've also worked really hard at becoming a paperless laboratory; our laboratory information management system has helped facilitate almost all of our old paper records into a paperless platform
 - We've also been fortunate enough to have a quality management system that allows us to log, track, and document our quality management processes, quality controls, and quality assurance records, so that's also all electronic and much easier to provide access to, whether for auditors, assessors, or discovery materials and requests
- Mr. Kelly: And you referenced the backlog. I'm not sure if that was specifically in reference to the drug chemistry aspect; what's the rate limiter in that discipline? And is there a need to

expand beyond servicing exclusively the county? Would that be a potential revenue generator if we had either the staff or the equipment, or what's grinding the gears on that particular program?

- Ms. Ho: We are very fortunate that every single position on the manning table for the forensic laboratory is occupied by an individual, so we're blessed to be funded and authorized to have those individuals on staff
 - Looking at the crime trends in my career, unfortunately there's no way to forecast any of these; the crime rates kind of go like the stock market, it's not really predictable
 - Nobody could have predicted what COVID did to the backlog across the nation; before COVID, our NIBIN firearms section did not have a backlog, but during and after COVID we had to crawl out of approximately an 800 service request backlog, and it took us two to three years to get out of that
 - There's reports and statistics coming out of the Department of Labor, Bureau of Justice and Statistics, that crime rate seems to have slowed down last year in 2024 and 2025, but just like the stock market, things go up, things go down
 - The only thing we can do as a forensic service provider is try to get ahead of the game with the information and resources that we have, and continue to improve our processes and the technologies that we have
- Ms. Anderson: One thing that I imagine came clear in Director Ho's presentation is that these are highly technical positions that take a really long time for folks to be trained and operational, a couple of years for most of them
 - There's been steady progress in the years since Director Ho has been in her position in reducing backlog, but some of that is contingent on being fully staffed to the point where everyone is ready to run and process things at full pace
 - In a couple of the different sections, which I know is standard, not just for our lab but elsewhere, you receive a certain number of items and process typically less than that, but there's a prioritization process that goes on in collaboration with law enforcement, in terms of triage and making sure you're processing what needs to be processed
- Ms. Ho: Absolutely; I'll use biology as an example, for the sexual assault kits that we outsource, we've been outsourcing quite a few, and right now there's probably five kits physically in the laboratory, the newest ones submitted to us
 - When we outsource kits to another laboratory to help with the backlog, the contract targets the two samples in the kit most likely to generate a profile that law enforcement could use for investigatory purposes, and they start there; if they don't get anything in those first two, we start going down and do some more
 - That's a similar pattern our laboratory applies for other types of cases, such as homicides, assaults, robberies, and non-violent crimes as well
 - Oftentimes we get a lot more evidence than we're able to handle; officers don't know what the perpetrator may have touched, so a lot of things get swabbed, handles, surfaces, counters, objects, TV screens, cords, and we do not have the capacity to process all of that

- We have conversations and discussions with the law enforcement detectives and ask them which ones they think we should work on first, pick their top two or three, and we'll go start from there; for a lot of the non-violent crimes, that's our first go-to
- For the more violent crimes, the volume is higher, homicides, assaults, sexual assaults; we will work a lot more of those, since they generally have a lot more items of evidence and, because of the violent nature of them, there tends to be some body fluids left behind, we focus on those as well because there's a higher chance of getting something
- Mr. Burtis: Could you talk a little bit about the physical condition of the building, the office where you're at? Where are we at with that?
- Ms. Ho: The building is really close to the emergency room at Upstate; it's sandwiched between Adams and Harrison Street
 - It's occupied by us, all of my sections; some laboratories have satellite locations, we do not, we're all together in one building, sharing it with the toxicology section and the medical examiner's office, across four floors including the basement
 - Inside we have the firearms firing range, which houses a pretty large tank and a very long range, and all of the electronic equipment
 - We also have a generator outside; unlike most generators that just keep the HVAC and the lights on, ours are supposed to keep the refrigerators and freezers going, all the equipment running; if they're not on the generator and they go on the fritz, that's \$50,000 or a million dollars, depending on which piece of equipment we're talking about
 - It's a 26-year-old building, and just like everybody's home, there are parts that need to be replaced after a certain number of years, like the roof, the furnace, and the water heater; we're very lucky the county has given us a dedicated buildings maintenance supervisor whose primary responsibility is to keep our building functioning and climate controlled, including humidity and static control for the evidence and equipment, and for the staff as well
 - We have 24-hour security folks, so there's always somebody in the building to know if something happened and call for help
- Mr. Romeo: Weren't there renovations going on? What's the status of those?
- Ms. Ho: Those have all been completed
 - Recently we were awarded a \$2.5 million renovations capital improvement project for the firearms and the latent print section, and we also built out a wellness room, or a mother's room, which the building didn't have before, since it was built in the late 1990s
 - The latent print section has been remodeled and it is at max efficiency; it was designed to be such, and I don't think we could make it any more efficient than it already is
 - It's the same with the firearms section: every firearms examiner has their own workstation, their own hoods to process serial number restoration because we use acid etching, and they also have their own comparison microscopes; it's not conducive to sharing, so it's very beneficial that they all have their own piece of equipment
- Ms. Denton: The budget season's coming up, so I'm just curious, with this Center for Forensic Science, is this built into the health department budget? That's where we would find all that.

And I know that this is also listed in the city abstract; could you explain that, since one of the services listed there is the forensic sciences?

- Ms. Anderson: I'm not sure about that; I can look into it and get back to you. Do you know, Renee?
- Ms. Ho: The only thing that we put in for this budget season that's a one-time cost would be what we call FRED for short, the Forensic Recovery Evidence Devices, for the digital evidence section
 - All of our equipment, whether the gas chromatographs and mass spectrometers in drug chemistry or the genetic analyzer and thermocycler in biology, has a lifespan, a period of time in which the service provider is willing to continue to provide maintenance and services; when we reach the end of that time frame, the vendor moves on to the next model and stops supporting the old one
 - The FREDs are one of those right now, reaching their end of life; we can see that based on speed, the quality of the results, or how often we need maintenance
 - For the gas chromatograph and mass spectrometer we got last year, it was to replace an older one that was constantly down for repairs, and this one is performing a whole lot better
 - With every piece of equipment we procure, we have to go through a validation process to make sure it's fit for purpose and not a lemon, since these units are made to order rather than coming off an assembly line, so every one is unique
 - If any specs come back different, we can either accept it and modify our procedures to meet the quality we desire, or return it to the vendor and ask for a better one
- Ms. Anderson: Any budget request related to the lab would fall under the health department budget; with respect to the city listing, I'm not quite sure, but I'll look into that and get back to you
- Ms. Denton: Thank you. And is there any state or federal funding involved here, or is it purely county?
- Ms. Ho: We do have grants that we are funded by; the DNA section has been a recipient of the Capacity Enhancement Backlog Reduction grant for about 20 years from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. We also receive the Aid to Localities grant from New York State, which we've received for probably about 15 to 20 years
 - We also apply, along with the state, for the Coverdell grant for forensic improvement; the amounts all fluctuate year to year, but total annually it's about a million dollars
 - Actually, thank you for bringing that up, we applied for a new grant this year that's never been released before, a \$300,000 grant for the NIBIN program; our NIBIN program was established with and through the ATF many years ago, and starting in 2027, the unit we have through the ATF is depreciating, meaning we have to get a completely new system and go through maintenance agreements with a vendor instead of through the ATF
 - This is a five-year grant, \$300,000 to last us five years, and we'll be looking forward to see what the future holds
- Mr. Romeo: With that, is that going to be a consistent program across the country so that it's shared information, or are you going to have to find who provides that?

- Ms. Ho: Every laboratory currently enrolled in the NIBIN program with ATF is aware of this, because unless they want to forfeit their NIBIN program, they're going to have to apply for it; the solicitation lists every laboratory that's on that list
 - If you're asking what happens after five years from now, I'm not sure
- Mr. Romeo: The NIBIN is run through the federal government right now, you're saying
- Ms. Ho: They will still be running it, they'll still be running the database; it's just the equipment and the maintenance of the equipment
- Mr. Romeo: Got it, okay, I thought it was a new database, but it's the same database, just new
- Ms. Ho: The database is exactly the same; it's still managed, run, and overseen by the ATF, but the hardware and the maintenance of that hardware is no longer under the responsibility and purview of the ATF
- Mr. Romeo: Understood, thank you
- Mr. Kelly: I have a couple of technology-related questions, you mentioned the importance of pattern recognition, I believe that was in reference to the firearms program; has there been any conversation nationwide or within the county about artificial intelligence? It seems like an obvious use case, not as the end-all-be-all, but as a high sensitivity screening tool
- Ms. Ho: There have been quite a few discussions in the community about the adoption of AI in forensic science; there are definitely challenges to consider before we take that leap
 - One thing to consider is court testimony, the defendant has a right to face their accuser, and with AI involved, who would be going to testify? That's not an answer I have
 - There are things we could potentially utilize AI for on the administrative side, but definitely not on the technical side at this point in time
 - Validation is required for any new technology or equipment we adopt; how would we validate a constantly changing platform, and ensure and trust the reliability of its output? Again, not a question I have an answer for
 - There are things the community as a whole is thinking about, considering, and figuring out, what we can do, if we can do anything about them
- Mr. Kelly: Secondly, you mentioned the transition to more of a paperless program; maybe I watch too many movies, but what challenges does that bring from an IT standpoint in terms of data security?
- Ms. Ho: I think with every improvement program there are pros and cons; in our efforts to reduce our carbon footprint, we've gone paperless
 - The pro is that we've reduced our carbon footprint and we're able to access a lot of our software and databases from anywhere, I can access my quality management system from my phone, I can remote in from my laptop anywhere on the planet, as long as it gives me permission to get in and review a report, look at a case, and access my folders
 - The con is that we're in a highly technological age, with AI, with very intelligent people with access to computers and computer coding, and things are being invented every single day that are beyond my ability to comprehend, and what used to be only sci-fi; what those challenges bring, unfortunately, only time will tell
 - What I do know is that the data and the records forensics has, wherever they're stored, are as secure as they possibly can be

- Mr. Kelly: Generally, these databases aren't ours; we're able to access state and federal databases, including the FBI, so the onus isn't entirely on us as a county to ensure their security
- Ms. Ho: There's definitely collaboration between county IT and the different agencies we collaborate with, such as the FBI for CODIS and NGI, the state for SAFIS, and the ATF for NIBIN; there's constant communication to ensure the data is secure

b. **INFORMATIONAL:** Overview of the Office of Vital Statistics – Kathryn Anderson, Commissioner; James Sullivan, Vital Records Manager

Note: The agenda item title was changed; the Medical Examiner's Office was not scheduled to present.

- Started with the county in 2022 with the Office of Vital Statistics; started working as manager in 2024; currently supervises a team of five specialists
- Handles everything to do with births and deaths in the county, at least the certificates: filing, correcting, issuing copies, and maintaining archives, both paper and electronic, in accordance with New York State public health law and regulations
- Births and deaths were consolidated under one county office in 1968; everything's gone through us; records go back to 1873 for the City of Syracuse, and the oldest are birth and death records from the Town of Spafford in 1847
- Started with handwritten ledgers, then photo negative film transfers, then photocopies, and now scanned and indexed electronic databases as much as possible, going back to 1962 for births and 2004 for deaths; it's an ongoing process to get everything scanned in and organized
- Birth certificates are still filed on paper, but hopefully not for much longer, with help from the statewide perinatal data system, which allows hospitals to fill them out electronically as much as possible, though it still requires an ink signature from the doctor or attendant
- Death certificates are filed completely electronically through the database application for vital events, or DAVE, administered by the state and provided by LexisNexis
- Over the past five years, issued 274,027 copies of birth and death records, averaging 218 copies per day, many of them duplicate copies for funeral directors ordering multiple death certificate copies for families for insurance or closing out accounts
- In that time, filed 30,750 new births and 28,501 new deaths; still in the positive
- Births: hospitals have five business days to get the records to us, then we have 10 days to get them out to the parents
- Deaths: doctor and funeral director have three days to get these filed; electronically, as long as it's during business hours, we're getting permits out and signed within 30 minutes as much as possible
- These numbers don't include amended or corrected records, which drives the number up much higher

Projects:

- Recently upgraded the phone system to a service called EVA, from Tipco, also used by DSS; it has some AI functionality but is more of a conversational phone attendant than the prior press-1/press-2 recordings
 - A lot of the process has been reining it in and providing the information it needs to give appropriate direction, and knowing when a person must be involved
 - The big thing is the ability to sort, screen, and review calls with full analytics, to get a feel for what people are asking about and where they're getting tripped up
- Sponsored birth certificates: started with the Department of Social Services, then expanded to the health department's substance use initiatives, to help those with financial need get copies of their birth certificate at no cost, especially important now that ID regulations have gotten stricter
- There's also a looming, long-overdue upgrade to the online request form

Challenges:

- Last year's REAL ID deadline was intense to work through; record requests increased on average 40% as people realized their original birth certificate copy was no longer good enough; that has since slowed back down to more of a baseline
- Currently dealing with a lot of dual-citizenship requests
 - In New York State, a certified copy of a birth certificate for someone deceased requires a court order; there's no other way around it; death certificates are a bit easier, but the office can only provide guidance, not legal advice, in its capacity as local registrars
- COVID's effects are still reverberating; New York State vital records was hit hard, with backlogs of six to eight months for things like court-ordered legal name changes, paternity, and correction reviews that the state has to be involved in; the county's own office was able to bounce back more quickly
- Working on improving documentation and rebuilding the knowledge base after a number of retirements of longtime staff, which is also an opportunity to get more knowledge written down and cross-train people
- The office's role is to both provide access to records and protect the privacy of those listed on them, which can be at odds
 - A grandparent taking care of a grandchild, for instance, needs a court order, not just a DCFS custody letter, to do business with the office
- Corrections to vital records require very strict supporting documentation
- There isn't a lot of slack given by the federal government or the DMV now because of the new federal ID guidelines

Looking forward:

- The AI attendant has been helpful with repetitive questions, though many determinations still require a person to give a yes or no; it's been challenging but also fun to learn the gray areas in public health law and regulations

- New York State is hoping to implement an electronic birth registration system next year, similar to what exists for death certificates
- Continuing to work with county IT and county legal on efficiency, response time and accuracy, and compliance with public health law, and changing standards
- Looking for ways to work more closely with other county departments that request records, both through the sponsored certificates program and routine government requests, to help people avoid being bounced between offices
- Working with hospitals for speedier, and delivery and accuracy in reporting

Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Kelly: These are going to sound like existential questions, and I don't mean them that way, but what happens when you're born and what happens when you die? How does one acquire a social security number? What is that whole process like on either end of the life cycle?
- Mr. Sullivan: No, it's a great question, when you're born, at least the birth certificate filing process, social security varies, because if you're born at a hospital, they'll usually handle that paperwork for you and send it in separately
 - Because these are filed separately, somebody can end up with their name spelled correctly in social security and incorrectly on the birth certificate
 - If you're born at home, it's signed by a midwife or your parents; if born at a hospital, by a doctor or the attendant; all of that information is verified and comes through to us, and we apply the signatures to the records, which are filed in theory forever on paper
 - The first copy is mailed out free of charge
 - The death certificate process is a little trickier, it's a collaboration between the medical attendant, either the hospital or sometimes the medical examiner's office, and a funeral director, who always has to be involved regardless of where you're being buried or cremated
- Mr. Romeo: My question is somewhat related to that, in terms of who you are responsible for, is it people who are born and die in Onondaga County, or people who live here? If I were to go somewhere else, would my records be here, or would they be where it happened?
- Mr. Sullivan: It's only where the event happens, if you're born in the county, if you pass away in the county, we have records for those
 - With the medical examiner, that can get tricky with funeral directors; if somebody's brought over from another county, they'll call us expecting a record, and even though somebody from the county signed it, it's filed elsewhere, so it's wherever the event takes place
- Mr. Romeo: Let's say I lose everything, be it a house fire or whatever it might be, and I literally have just my person; how would I get my birth certificate? What does that look like? How do I do that?
- Mr. Sullivan: There are a few ways around it, we have leeway in the certain types of ID we can take; if you show up in person, we can take two forms of signature IDs, like a signed social security card and a signed debit or credit card together, and seeing you in person helps

- If you lose truly everything, we call it an ID of last resort, a sworn or notarized statement attesting to your identity from somebody who can vouch for you, or if your parents are still around and can order records, that's another way around it
- A lot of the challenge is just the creativity, working with people to both protect the records and get them access if they don't have anything to provide
- Mr. Romeo: I just think about our homeless population, or people who lose everything
- Mr. Sullivan: That's been an area where it's been great working with DSS and with substance use initiatives on these projects to kind of help alleviate that stress, because it is something we hear every day, well, you need a birth certificate to get an ID, you need an ID to get a birth certificate, it can be a loop, it doesn't have to be, so we try to figure that out
- Ms. Anderson: I want to acknowledge and thank James and Raneer for coming; typical departments of public health are all different across the state, but a center for forensics lab and vital statistics don't always fall under core public health, but they link so well here, and a lot of that is thanks to their leadership
 - As you've heard, they have high technical expertise, and they have a really important job that they do very well
 - I really appreciate the way that they partner with us, working with the substance use initiative team so we can learn from what they're identifying in the toxicology lab about emerging drugs; their innovation is just exceptional, and we're really fortunate to have both of them as part of the health department
- Chair Romeo noted that the agenda had listed a Medical Examiner's Office item that should not have been included, as that office was not scheduled to present that day

C. Adjournment

A motion was made by Mr. Burtis, seconded by Ms. Denton, to adjourn the meeting; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:31 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



SPENCER D. BERG, Deputy Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: **HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

DATE: **AUGUST 25, 2026**

NAME (Please Print)	DEPT/AGENCY/ORGANIZATION
Kathryn Anderson	OCHD
Jessica Vinciguerra	OCHD
James Sullivan	OCHD
Raneer Ho	OCHD
John Kennedy	Personnel
Rebecca Morgan	Comptroller
David Stewart	CCE ONON