

Hennepin County Medical Examiner's office to relocate from downtown Minneapolis to suburbs

A larger facility will meet Hennepin Co. demands.

By Kelly Smith (<http://www.startribune.com/kelly-smith/101372379/>) Star Tribune |

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For the first time in its history Minnesota's largest medical examiner's office is moving out of downtown Minneapolis, from its coveted site in the shadow of U.S. Bank Stadium, and out to the suburbs.

The Hennepin County medical examiner's office is looking to the south or southwest metro, where it expects to identify a site in early 2017 for a new \$58 million facility. The ME's office, which also handles autopsies and death investigations for Dakota and Scott counties, long has wanted to move to a larger facility to meet growing demands for services.

The relocation also could open up a valuable 2-acre plot next to U.S. Bank Stadium and the rapidly redeveloping Downtown East area. There are no plans to move the building, which also houses the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office crime lab. But the county would look to sell the site for top dollar if the County Board decided to relocate the crime lab, County Administrator David Hough said.

"It is an asset," he said. "That is a potential option at a later point."

The Hennepin County medical examiner's office serves about one-third of Minnesota's population and expects to perform a record 1,300 autopsies this year.

"We're really close to capacity as it is, and it's just going to get worse as the counties continue to grow," Medical Examiner Andrew Baker said.

Hennepin County was slated to close this month on the \$5.3 million purchase of a vacant 7 acre site for the new facility, off Interstate 494 near Bush Lake Road in west Bloomington. But plans fell through before a purchase agreement was reached.

Hough said that county officials will explore other suburban sites in the first quarter of 2017, looking for easy freeway and transit access to make it convenient for all three counties to reach, as well as families and funeral directors.

The three counties recently signed off on a new agreement for up to 30 years that included a new formula for how much each must pay annually and divided costs for a future building based on their percentage of the caseload. In 2017, Hennepin will pay \$4.8 million, Dakota will pay nearly \$1.2 million and Scott will pay about \$315,000.

The counties plan to return to the Legislature in the coming session to seek nearly \$26 million to build the facility.

To turn the tide

In its more than 50 years, the Hennepin County medical examiner's office has always been in downtown Minneapolis, first at the then-Hennepin County General Hospital (later renamed Hennepin County Medical Center). The ME's office, which replaced the coroner's office in 1963, moved to its current building off Chicago Avenue in 1999.

The number of cases has increased since then, especially after Hennepin County agreed in 2013 to provide services to Dakota and Scott counties for all deaths from traffic fatalities to homicides and natural deaths.

Besides autopsies, the office oversees about 7,300 death investigations and 8,000 cremations a year. Deaths have risen along with grim trends such as [an increase in opioid use](http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-s-drug-overdose-deaths-rise-sharply/37940441/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minnesota-s-drug-overdose-deaths-rise-sharply/37940441/>).



(http://stmedia.stimg.co/ows_148245588933523.jpg?w=263)

Autopsy tables outside the cooler/freezer where bodies are kept for autopsy, sometimes pending identification at the Hennepin County medical...

“I’d sure like to see this tide turned,” Baker said.

The office also handles the deaths of residents of other counties if they die at HCMC in Minneapolis or North Memorial Medical Center in Robbinsdale, both Level 1 adult trauma centers.

A new and bigger facility

This fall, the county issued a request for proposals for the new facility. It would be designed to last until 2050 and nearly double the cramped 39,800-square-foot space that the ME’s office has now.

The current office lacks adequate autopsy stations and body storage, especially if the metro area experienced a massive disaster such as a terrorist attack, Baker said. The coolers for body bags approach capacity every couple weeks. Waiting areas can only accommodate one family at a time.

Even without Dakota and Scott’s cases, Baker said that Hennepin County alone would soon outgrow its space.

The office’s downtown location makes it difficult to reach quickly and has limited parking for law enforcement, funeral directors and family. The suburban facility is expected to have ample parking, space for cutting-edge technology such as 3-D imaging equipment, and classrooms for law enforcement and medical students, Baker said.

A modern facility also would help attract staff at a time when the U.S. has a shortage of forensic pathologists.

But the \$58 million price tag isn’t cheap. That’s why the counties are asking again for \$25.9 million in the state bonding bill for construction.

“We’re not talking about building an office or a bank,” Baker said. “It’s more like building a lot of operating rooms.”

For the past three years, Hennepin County officials have discussed building a new facility after determining that renovating or reconfiguring the current building wasn’t efficient or economical.

Scott and Dakota County leaders said they will keep working with Hennepin to find a new site that serves them all, part of a [trend of counties](http://www.startribune.com/death-investigations-shift-from-county-coroners-to-regional-medical-examiners/306436531/) (<http://www.startribune.com/death-investigations-shift-from-county-coroners-to-regional-medical-examiners/306436531/>) moving toward regional offices.

Scott County Administrator Gary Shelton said there haven’t been any issues among the three counties.

“This regional approach is the right way to deliver this critical service,” he said, adding they’re looking forward to a facility closer to Scott County. “Anything out of downtown Minneapolis would be easier.”