

**CCMEO 2022-23 BUDGET HEARING 11-4-2021, prepared remarks
Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner Dr. Thomas Gilson, MD**

As with all agencies, the pandemic has presented the Office with challenges, some more unique in nature than others. Obviously, there is very little that can be done remotely so the majority of our staff have worked straight through 2020 and 2021 in the office, designated as essential personnel. They have carried out these duties and responsibilities admirably and I am proud to have worked with everyone of them over the past decade now.

We have adapted our flu surveillance program to include COVID19 to provide Boards of Health with additional assistance in tracking the pandemic locally and have developed a statistical model using our real time fatality data as an early indicator for spikes in COVID19 cases.

Unfortunately, in the midst of the pandemic, we have also seen the continuation of an existing epidemic and the emergence of a second, serious and deadly outbreak. The Opioid crisis has not subsided. While true, 2020 saw a continued slowing of the rate of drug fatalities, 2021 has seen a tragic resurgence, mirroring the record

year of 2017. We currently project another year of at least 700 or more drug deaths in Cuyahoga County.

2020 also saw the serious surge of gun violence and a massive increase in homicides in the County, topping 250 for the first time in 4 decades. There has been no drop off in 2021 and the rate of homicides attributable to firearms is increasing as well, up to nearly 85% in 2020 and now in 2021, exceeding 90%.

This means our in-county caseload will likely increase at or near 2,500 cases, a 1.5% increase after a 4.5% increase in 2020. The number of scene investigations over 1,400 or just a 1% increase after a 9% increase the previous year. The number of autopsies will likely exceed 1,600, a 4% increase after an 11% increase in 2020. We have also increased the number of case reviews by medical record. This practice allows certain cases to be reviewed by medical staff without the need for a physical examination and costly transport. This number exceeded 600 for the first time in 2020 and is projected to pass that number in 2021 as well, an increase of 20% from 2019.

This is also not unique to just our County. The dozen or so counties which we do contract work for have made a significant increase in autopsy requests, especially in the number of homicides. We are

projecting an increase in out-of-county requests by nearly 30%, exceeding 500 cases for the first time. A full 25% of these will be homicide cases.

Throughout these many crises, we have managed to maintain the offices multiple accreditations, through the hard work and perseverance of a dedicated staff. We have also been fully supported by this Council and this Administration, for which I am exceedingly grateful.

Some new undertakings over the next biennium we have discussed initiating or being a part of, include:

- Cold case unit

- Crime scene forensic unit

- Crime Gun Intelligence Center

We continue to seek partnerships and grant funding for such initiatives.

Most of the supply chain issues that plagued us early in the pandemic seem to have been resolved but we have been hit with higher than usual inflationary costs. That is not unique to just our agency, but the percentage increases seem somewhat higher due to

the specialized nature of our equipment and supplies. We also saw heavy turnover last year, in areas which are quite scarce to replace but we have seemingly overcome these hurdles as well, to be near 100% staff capacity. I certainly hope that the next two years would seemingly be an easier road than the last two, but I hesitate to be optimistic. The past two years have taught us all to be wary and prepared for the unforeseen.

If gun violence and drug and opioid use continue their trajectories, this Office could well see significant impacts to its operations and response times. Again, these are largely out of our control and will require swift, decisive action if we are to maintain the high levels of service the public has come to expect from this Office. We have been shown this Administrations' willingness to adapt and provide needed funding when exigencies arise and we are confident in the assurances provided by leadership that this will continue in the 2022-23 budget cycle.

Again, I thank you all for your continued strong support of this Office and the work it does and those who do it.