

LOCAL

NC autopsy backlog frustrates families, leaves cases open



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NORTH CAROLINA — Some North Carolina families are waiting months, even a year, to find out how their loved one died due to the state's autopsy backlog.

Lawmakers are trying to address this in several different ways, but it is all tied up in the looming budget right now.

Barbara Walsh is the founder of Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina, an organization for families of fentanyl victims. She said fixing the autopsy backlog is critical to getting families closure and justice.

For months, Walsh had no idea what killed her 24-year-old daughter Sofia who had just moved to Charlotte for a new job.

"She died because she drank a water bottle that had diluted fentanyl in it," Walsh said.

Now, families she's helping through her organization are waiting even longer, sometimes over a year, for toxicology results as the medical examiner's office faces a massive backlog in autopsies.

Walsh is vocal about the state budget as some lawmakers have promised to help clear the autopsy backlog.

One of the new proposals would pay pathologists more to try and fill positions at the short-staffed medical examiner's office, which has seen a 30% increase in cases. Cases involving suspected overdose deaths are up by 58%.

Detectives and district attorneys in the area told Channel 9 that they need the autopsy results to charge someone with death by distribution as they try and get a hold of the fentanyl crisis.

In addition to paying pathologists more, Walsh urged lawmakers to fund more toxicologist positions to get those results faster.

Walsh believes this will save more lives.

“The sheriff can’t arrest this person who was dealing fentanyl in the form of a counterfeit hydrocodone pill,” Walsh said. “We can have someone sitting out there for 6,8,10,12 months, distributing illicit fentanyl in the form of counterfeit pills to unsuspecting teenagers,” she added.

Another bill tied up in appropriations would create a new [regional autopsy center in Union County](#) that local lawmakers say would also help relieve the backlog.

Channel 9 will continue to follow this story.