Your Right to Know / Tim Vetscher

When people die, openness matters

In any community, the role of the medical examiner is vital.

Medical examiners — or coroners, in the [nearly half](https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/vitalrecords/cmelist.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com) of Wisconsin’s 72 counties that have them as an alternative — determine the cause and manner of death, support the criminal justice system and track data to identify trends that can impact public health and safety.

For me and other Milwaukee-area journalists, the insights provided by the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office are integral to our coverage, providing crucial details and important context. Among the recent examples where the level of openness has played a key role are the COVID-19 pandemic, the [tragic deaths](https://www.tmj4.com/news/local-news/3-milwaukee-men-die-of-hypothermia-during-cold-snap-medical-examiners-office-says?utm_source=chatgpt.com) of three men due to extreme cold last January and the [high-profile case](https://www.tmj4.com/news/milwaukee-county/former-hotel-front-desk-worker-pleads-guilty-to-battery-in-milwaukee-mans-death) of D’Vontaye Mitchell last June.

Traditionally, the office has supplied “demographic reports” as well as “narrative reports.” Demographic reports include information such as the name of the deceased, where the death occurred, and the name of a family member who was notified. Narrative reports, in contrast, delve into the circumstances surrounding each case.

“Narrative reports are particularly illustrative when compared to other available public information,” [wrote](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2025/03/04/milwaukee-county-medical-examiner-changes-policy-on-releasing-reports/80851944007/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) David Clarey in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in March. “Contextual information, such as whether a driver ran a red light or if a homicide resulted from a heated argument, is often missing (from demographic reports) and requires time-consuming requests from media and families alike.”

The media in Milwaukee were pleased with the level of openness we experienced from Karen Domagalski, the longtime operations manager for the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office. But when Domagalski retired on Feb. 19, the county’s medical examiner, Dr. Wieslawa Tlomak, announced a change in policy. Henceforth, she said, the office would stop sharing narrative reports until investigations were concluded and cases closed. She acknowledged that this shift represented a significant change in past practices.

Concerned by the change in policy, several news executives, including me, sent Tlomak a [letter](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/25903429/letter-to-milwaukee-county-medical-examiner.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIA4JBBEJ7KWPNZQB7I%2F20250421%2Fus-east-1%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20250421T220316Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Signature=9c374f1c2f5cff44eabb1331c1bd44005f007673ef10a9a9f45e8c20dcf9de52) on April 4. It read, in part:

“The decision to curtail access to these preliminary findings poses a troubling scenario for our news organizations and, more importantly, for the residents of Milwaukee County. Withholding this essential information may leave the public waiting weeks, months, or even longer for basic insights into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of community members. This delay not only hampers our ability to keep the public informed but also undermines trust in the transparency of governmental processes.”

The letter noted that having access to narrative reports helps “clarify the circumstances” surrounding deaths and fosters “a better understanding among citizens about the events that impact their safety.”

Tlomak replied to our letter nearly three weeks later on April 23rd. Her [response](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/25915740/response-to-letter-to-milwaukee-county-medical-examiner.pdf) read, in part:

“I recognize that this shift in operational policies and procedures is new to members of the media that cover death investigations and public safety matters in Milwaukee County. After an internal review of operational policies and procedures, it became apparent that it is not within the ME’s Office mission and purpose to provide inaccurate and/or incomplete information to the public, as the disclosure of these draft details have the potential to cause significant harm to family members most affected by a death.”

Here’s my response to that: Dr. Tlomak, if your concern is releasing inaccurate information, the appropriate next step would be to correct the information rather than stopping its release altogether. I urge you to work with the journalists who rely on the reports provided by your office to develop a solution that ensures timely access to vital information without compromising the integrity of ongoing investigations.

Transparency is crucial for maintaining public trust.

*Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (wisfoic.org), a group dedicated to open government. Tim Vetscher, a Council member, is news director at TMJ4 in Milwaukee.*



Tim Vetscher, provided photo

*==========================PRE-EDIT===========================*

In any community, the role of the Medical Examiner is vital. Medical Examiners determine the cause and manner of death, support the criminal justice system, and track data to identify trends that can impact public health and safety.

For journalists covering Milwaukee County, the insights provided by the Medical Examiner are often essential to our reporting. The COVID-19 pandemic, the tragic deaths of three men due to extreme cold last January, and the high-profile case of D’Vontaye Mitchell last June serve as recent examples where information from the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office was integral to our coverage, providing either crucial details or important context.

Traditionally, the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office has supplied “Demographic Reports” and “Narrative Reports.” Demographic reports include information such as the name of the deceased, the location of their death, and the name of a family member notified about the death. These reports tend to answer the who, where, and when of a death. In contrast, Narrative Reports delve into the circumstances surrounding each case, offering insights into the why and how. As David Clarey of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel remarked on March 4, “Narrative reports are particularly illustrative when compared to other available public information. Both the Milwaukee Police Department and the Medical Examiner's Office share data publicly through online dashboards; however, that information is sparse — merely raw counts of crimes or basic identifying details. Contextual information, such as whether a driver ran a red light or if a homicide resulted from a heated argument, is often missing and requires time-consuming requests from media and families alike.”

However, on February 27, Milwaukee County Medical Examiner Dr. Wieslawa Tlomak informed us via email that her office would stop sharing Narrative Reports until investigations were concluded and cases closed. She acknowledged that this shift represented a significant change in past practices. Dr. Tlomak closed her email by inviting questions.

Indeed, we had questions. Yet, nearly two months later, those questions remain unanswered. Despite numerous attempts to engage Dr. Tlomak through calls, emails, and even a visit to her office, we have yet to receive a meaningful response.

Concerned by this lack of dialogue, I, along with fellow news executives in Milwaukee, drafted a letter to Dr. Tlomak on April 4, expressing our concerns. In our letter, we emphasized, “The decision to curtail access to these preliminary findings poses a troubling scenario for our news organizations and, more importantly, for the residents of Milwaukee County. Withholding this essential information may leave the public waiting weeks, months, or even longer for basic insights into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of community members. This delay not only hampers our ability to keep the public informed but also undermines trust in the transparency of governmental processes.”

“We are particularly alarmed by the decision to restrict access to the 'narrative reports,' which have been invaluable in providing critical context for high-profile deaths in recent years. These reports clarify the circumstances surrounding such incidents, fostering a better understanding among citizens about the events that impact their safety. The significance of this context cannot be overstated; it plays a pivotal role in our collective efforts to promote community awareness and engagement.”

A week later, Dr. Tlomak responded to our letter, stating, “We have received the letter and we will be in touch.” As of now, that follow-up has yet to occur.

I urge Dr. Tlomak once more to engage with me and other news leaders to develop a framework that ensures timely access to vital information without compromising the integrity of ongoing investigations. Transparency is crucial for maintaining public trust, and we owe it to our community to foster open communication.

[*Click here*](https://ewscripps-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/tim_vetscher_tmj4_com/ESiCGlwyV25Ck9f0oRvgdHYB2aGSy3Nskg8fl2fbK6JOTg?e=xcjSGD) *to read the full letter sent by Milwaukee news leaders and open government advocates to Dr. Tlomak.*

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*Earlier draft:*

*“You don’t appreciate what you have until it’s gone.”*

*It’s how journalists in Milwaukee feel about Karen Domagalski, the former Operations Manager*

*for the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office who abruptly retired on February 19 th of*

*this year.*

*From an open government standpoint, Karen was about as good as it gets. In a timely fashion,*

*Karen consistently responded to open records requests by emailing “Demographic Reports”*

*which contains such information as the name of the deceased, the location of their death, and*

*the name of someone who was notified about the person’s death (typically a relative). But*

*beyond the Demographic Reports, Karen would also supply “Narrative Reports.” If*

*Demographic Reports conveyed the who, the where, and the when, Narrative Reports covered*

*the why and the how. As David Clarey of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel wrote on March 4 th ,*

*“Narrative reports are particularly illustrative when compared to other available public*

*information. Both the Milwaukee Police Department and the medical examiner&#39;s office share*

*data publicly through online dashboards. The information provided in those, however, is spare*

*— raw counts of crimes or only basic identifying information. Details like if a driver ran a red*

*light or if a homicide occurred following a heated argument are not available from other*

*sources, barring requesting information in what can be a time-consuming process for media*

*and families alike.”*

*Following Karen’s retirement, Milwaukee County Medical Examiner Dr. Wieslawa Tlomak sent*

*an email to journalists in Milwaukee explaining that she would be the one responding to public*

*records requests until the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office “hires (Karen’s)*

*replacement.” But in her email, Dr. Tlomak also announced her office would no longer be*

*sharing Narrative Reports “until after we have concluded our investigation and closed our*

*case.” Dr. Tlomak acknowledged, “I understand my decision to hold back these draft reports*

*represents a significant change in past practice.” She closed her email by writing “Please let me*

*know any questions.”*

*We, indeed, had questions. Yet now, coming up on two months since her announcement, our*

*questions have gone unanswered. Despite our repeated attempts to talk with Dr.*

*Tlomak…phone calls, emails, even a visit to her office, she’s yet to respond in any meaningful*

*way.*

*Which is why I, along with other news executives in Milwaukee, drafted a letter to Dr. Tlomak*

*to express our concerns. In our letter, we wrote “The decision to curtail access to these*

*preliminary findings poses a troubling scenario for our news organizations and, more*

*importantly, for the residents of Milwaukee County. Withholding this essential information may*

*leave the public waiting weeks, months, or even longer to gain basic insights into the*

*circumstances surrounding the deaths of their fellow community members. This delay not only*

*hampers our ability to keep the public informed but also undermines trust in the transparency*

*of governmental processes.”*

*“We are particularly alarmed by the decision to restrict access to the &quot;narrative reports,&quot; which*

*have been invaluable in providing critical context for high-profile deaths in recent years. These*

*reports help clarify the circumstances surrounding such incidents, fostering a better*

*understanding among citizens about the events that impact their safety. The importance of this*

*context cannot be overstated, as it plays a pivotal role in our collective efforts to foster*

*community awareness and engagement.”*

*The letter was dated April 4 th and was sent the same day to Dr. Tlomak as well as Milwaukee*

*County Executive David Crowley, Milwaukee County Public Affairs Director Emily Tau, and Dr.*

*Ben Weston, Chief Medical Director for the Milwaukee County Office of Emergency*

*Management.*

*After not receiving a response from anyone listed above, Dr. Tlomak finally responded to a*

*follow-up email writing “We have received the letter and we will be in touch.” As of the writing*

*of this column, that has not happened. After a similar follow-up email that same day, Jonathan*

*Fera, Communications Director to the County Executive, wrote the exact same thing as Dr.*

*Tlomak. “Thanks for following up. We have received the letter and we will be in touch,” wrote*

*Fera. Again, that never happened.*

*I again call for Dr. Tlomak to meet with me and fellow news leaders to establish a framework*

*that ensures timely access to vital information without compromising the integrity of ongoing*

*investigations.*

*In the meantime, does anyone know how I can reach Karen in the hopes of getting her to*

*reconsider retirement?*