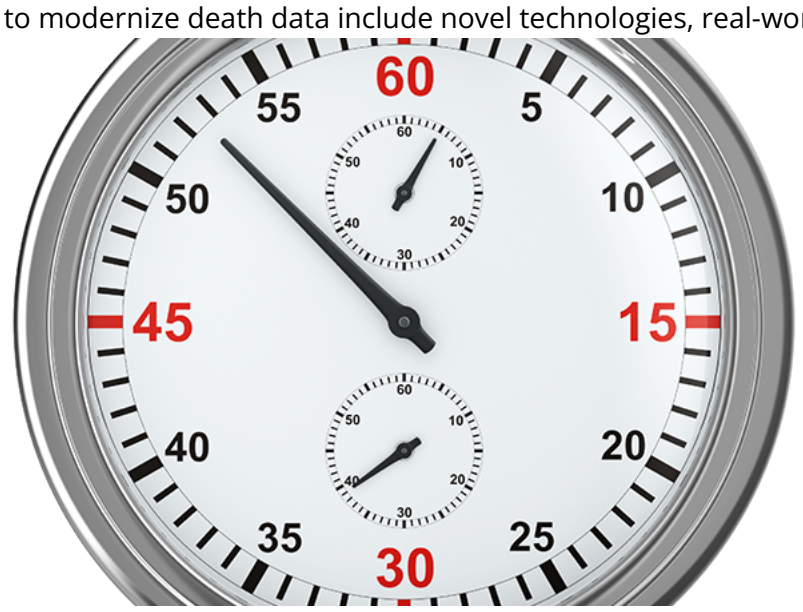
Public Health Surveillance and Data

A Timelier Understanding of Death

Innovative ways to modernize death data include novel technologies, real-world testing, and shared community spaces



Death certificates are a powerful tool for understanding how and why people die, providing the most reliable and complete information on ~3 million deaths per year in America. Cause-of-death information is valuable to families and to public health – and getting it right matters.

In 2022, we stood up MedCoder, a new system for coding cause of death information from death certificates. MedCoder incorporates natural language processing and machine learning to code nearly 90% of records automatically, compared to less than 75% for the legacy system.

With a host of improvements and investments, we're also approaching the target of 80% of death records being received within 10 days of the date of the event. Since January 2022, CDC's National Center for Health Statistics has been hosting quarterly testing events focused on rapid, seamless exchange of death records between jurisdictions and CDC, with a new, fully functional test environment available to jurisdictions.

Work is also well underway to help data move more seamlessly between medical examiner/coroners and jurisdictions, between death reporting and other surveillance systems (like case reporting and cancer registries), and among jurisdictions.

2022 Timeline

January
- Real-world testing takes off to improve the flow of death records between jurisdictions and CDC

June
The new MedCoder system begins automatically coding cause of death information from death certificates

October
A community comes together to facilitate partnerships between medical examiners/coroners and CDC programs

Spotlight: A shared space for learning and innovation

The National Vital Statistics System Modernization Community of Practice is a virtual forum for sharing ideas, technical tools, resources, and promising practices to improve birth and death data. Together with jurisdictions and partners, we're exploring innovative solutions and standards that make data more available for action.

- Read Stories from the Modernization Community

Learn more

- Modernizing the National Vital Statistics System
- Modernizing Medical Examiner and Coroner Data Systems

Last Reviewed: April 11, 2023
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of Public Health Data, Surveillance, and Technology