A n elected prosecutor/coroner from rural Pacific Northwest. An experienced paramedic/investigator from a bustling South Carolina county. A novice forensic investigator from a thriving South Florida city. These professionals and others from equally diverse backgrounds have one thing in common: they all believe they improved their job skills by participating in the Medicolegal Death Investigation Training Program offered by the National Forensic Science Technology Center (NFSTC), lead organization in the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Forensic Technology Center of Excellence (CoE).

Using NFSTC’s successful blended learning technique (see TechBeat, Summer 2010) of three days of hands-on coursework following online training modules, the Medicolegal Death Investigation Training Program provided medical examiners, coroners and medicolegal death investigators with general knowledge of how to use available forensic science resources, including:

- Crime scene processing.
- Photography.
- Latent fingerprint processing.
- Controlled substances analysis.
- Toxicology.
- Forensic anthropology.
- Forensic entomology.
- Forensic odontology.
- Firearm and tool mark collection and preservation.
- Trace evidence analysis.
- Fire debris analysis.
- Explosives and explosive device identification.
- Forensic biology (serology/DNA).

“Our goal is to reduce the impact and drain on resources that providing in-house training in these areas can have on public agencies and crime laboratories,” says Jane Smith, NFSTC instructional services senior coordinator. Another major goal was to make students aware of the forensic science disciplines that can be called on as resources; for example, calling in a forensic anthropologist for assistance with skeletal remains.

The training and its goals evolved from a 2008 workshop developed at the request of the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) through Bureau of Justice Assistance funding. Recognizing an ongoing need for this type of training, NFSTC used feedback from the workshop to apply for NIJ funding to develop and provide four sessions of the expanded blended learning program to an audience that included, but was not limited to, NAME members. Although NFSTC could only select 100 individuals to participate in the hands-on sessions, the sustainable online training remains on the NFSTC Online Learning System (https://nfstc.desire2learn.com/) and approximately 200 enrolled attendees can share those lessons with their coworkers through May 31, 2011.

One of those attendees, Don McCown, an appointed deputy coroner for Anderson County, S.C., brought 35 years of experience as a paramedic and 15 years as an investigator into the training, yet still found plenty to take away from the class.

“The training was fantastic,” McCown says. “The most useful part was the actual hands-on, such as the actual processing of fingerprints. All of the instructors were extremely knowledgeable and took a personal approach to helping every one of us.”

The investigators in McCown’s office investigate approximately 1,600 deaths in Anderson County each year, and he has trained his coworkers using the online
McCown also appreciated that the training took all aspects of death investigation into account, rather than focusing on homicides, because the vast majority of this type of investigation involve natural or accidental deaths.

Juelie Dalzell, recently retired prosecutor for Jefferson County, Wash., who also acts as coroner, also appreciated the lack of focus on homicide investigation, as her office has dealt with only six homicides in the past 10 years. She appreciated instead learning about how to handle a bombing investigation and acquiring the invaluable information that fingerprints can be lifted from human skin.

“The fact that you can lift fingerprints off skin is so valuable on domestic violence cases,” Dalzell says. “Learning that investigators could get fingerprints off a victim’s skin, for instance if a woman reports someone tried to choke her, was awesome. I showed our officers how to do it in the lab and they were really impressed.”

And like McCown, Dalzell found value in the online portion of the training.

“I was intrigued by the fact that they did an online session first,” she says. “It not only allowed them (the instructors) to see how well we did, it also allowed the participants to see what the class was going to be like.”

“We’re in a very small rural community that is far away from everything,” Dalzell adds. “The nearest city is Seattle and that’s two hours away, so we don’t have any colleagues nearby to talk to and we’re really on our own. Getting together with people who are in the same field is so valuable, you learn so much that way. The networking is way up there when it comes to takeaway value.”

Colin Sollinger, a forensic investigator in Ft. Myers, Fla., who has less than a year’s experience, also appreciated the opportunity to network with and learn from his peers.

“It was a great opportunity to meet other people in the field. I want to form good habits now and get as much exposure as possible to different techniques so I can distill what works best for our agency,” Sollinger says.

He adds, “My background is more in forensics and crime scene and my medical background is not as strong. I learned a lot about talking with doctors and nurses. The toxicology instructor was really strong and the photography portion was important too.”

For more information on the training classes offered through the National Forensic Science Technology Center, visit http://www.nfstc.org. At NIJ, contact Brigid O’Brien at (202) 305-1983 or brigid.obrien@usdoj.gov.