



Strengthening Washington State's Coroner and Medical Examiner System



Medicolegal death investigation systems in the State of Washington, include the elected Coroner, elected Prosecutor/Coroner, and the appointed Medical Examiner working with but independent of public health, public safety, and law enforcement communities. These county offices are responsible for conducting medicolegal death investigations and certifying the cause and manner of death within their respective county jurisdictions.

The roles of the Coroner and Medical Examiner Offices is to investigate, with the use of trained medicolegal investigators and board-certified forensic pathologists, any death falling under their jurisdictional authority. Jurisdictional authority is based on county and state legal mandates, but generally include deaths that are unattended, known or suspected to be of unnatural means, unexplained, or of public health interest. Unnatural and unexplained deaths include homicides, suicides, unintentional injuries, drug-related deaths, and other disease-related deaths that are sudden or unexpected.

Washington's medicolegal community is posed for improvement. In such, that the state is embracing the Federal ideology and guidelines set forth by the Forensic Science Standards Board and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Goals of the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners



- Maintain county jurisdiction as presently defined by statute. This ensures real-time investigative practices that communities demand.
- Bolster current basic and advanced certified training practices to expand the comprehensive investigative knowledge of local offices through additional funding.
- Legislative mandate for the certification of all medicolegal practitioners, to include the chief medicolegal officer of each county within 24 months of election or appointment.
- Legislative mandate for the accreditation of all medicolegal offices. To include that those offices not operating an actual morgue enlist the services of neighboring counties with accredited morgues.
- Incremental funding to expand the state's infrastructure for forensic toxicology services focused toward death investigation.

Certification and Accreditation



-Since 2012, the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners with funding from the state's death investigations account overseen by the Washington Forensic Investigative Council has provided a basic death investigation course that meets the requirement of the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators certification. During this period 35 of the state's 39 county offices have participated in this training. Providing basic death investigation knowledge to approximately 223 attendees. No new classes because of COVID.

Certification and Accreditation Continued

-Of those trained, Washington State has 96 nationally certified medicolegal death investigators in 21 of the 39 counties through the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. Currently, there is no mandate for attendees to become nationally certified after completing the state's basic death investigation course.

-Lengthy toxicology analysis turn-around times places those offices who are accredited in jeopardy of losing accreditation. This is also compounded in the increase number of autopsies with the current opioid epidemic. Forensic pathologists are limited under accreditation standards to a matrix that allows 250 autopsies annually.

-All counties use board certified forensic pathologists who are currently licensed in the State of Washington. Where autopsies are conducted: only 6 counties use funeral homes to conduct autopsies, 3 counties use a local hospital. All other counties have designated fully functional morgue or contract inter-agency agreements.



Timeline of Improvements to Washington's Medicolegal System

2015 – Changed the Basic Death Investigation Course from 40 hours to 80 hours.

2017 - A statewide case management system (MDILog) provided to counties at no cost. Needed for a uniform state reporting and data collection.

2019 - Increase funding for medicolegal training increase basic death investigation course to 240 hours (first increase in funding since 1998), autopsy reimbursement (including funding for outsourcing toxicology for non-criminal cases), and augmenting state anthropology and odontology services.

2020 - 2021 - Seeking legislative mandate for certification and accreditation of medicolegal practices within Washington State.



With the successful adoption of these goals, Washington State will have one of the most comprehensive medicolegal systems in the United States. This will not only benefit the criminal justice and public health communities but also those populations for which we serve with real-time collection of investigative and surveillance data.



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