



## Washington State Senate

Olympia Office:  
239 John A. Cherberg Building  
PO Box 40445  
Olympia, WA 98504-0445

**Senator Manka Dhingra**  
Deputy Majority Leader  
45th Legislative District

(360) 786-7672  
Manka.Dhingra@leg.wa.gov  
Toll-Free: 1-800-562-6000  
TTY: 1-800-833-6388

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Nelson and Goodwin and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the importance of this bill.

My name is Senator Manka Dhingra, and I represent the 45<sup>th</sup> Legislative District in Washington State. I am Deputy Majority Leader and Chair the Senate Law & Justice Committee.

A drastic shortage of trained forensic pathologists qualified to be medical examiners has led to serious delays in death investigations.

For example, over Labor Day weekend in 2022, tragedy struck as a floatplane crashed off Whidbey Island in the Puget Sound.

**Nearly two weeks later**, when the remains washed up on shore, the county faced a heartbreaking reality – there was no forensic pathologist available to examine them.

It took an agonizing three weeks to identify the remains as those of a retired schoolteacher who had been on that ill-fated plane.

This heartbreaking example is not an isolated incident.

The recommended caseload for a forensic pathologist is 250 to 325 cases a year, but in the county where Seattle is, pathologists are doing in the range of 400 autopsies per year.

In Washington, the shortage of qualified medical examiners has led to delays lasting **five to seven months** in death investigations.

Families are left in limbo, grappling with uncertainty and the pain of not knowing the cause of their loved one's death.

Last year, I sponsored [Senate Bill 5523](#) to confront this shortage head-on.

I will just highlight two parts of the bill.

One is that it created a task force similar to the one you are proposing with this legislation. Their report is due this coming October 1.

The other is that it created a student loan repayment program for board-certified forensic pathologists who work in high-need areas of the state for four years. The pathologists will be eligible for up to \$25,000 in student loan repayment for each of those four years.

This will help alleviate the burden of student debt for trained forensic pathologists who work in parts of our state where the need is high.

That's an important way our state will incentivize people to enter the profession to help ensure that rural parts of our state can attract people qualified to be medical examiners.

Thank you for your time and commitment to making steps towards ensuring that every family, regardless of their location, can find closure and justice in the face of tragedy.