

Senate Committee on Health Care
Oregon State Senate
RE: HB 4003

Chair Patterson and Members of the Committee for the record I am Timothy Grisham, Deputy Director for the Washington Association of County Officials testifying neutral on HB 4003.

Nearly a decade ago the Washington Association of Coroners/Medical Examiners (WACME) and the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO) identified a disparity of medical death investigation services among Washington's 39 counties. To best serve all of Washington's citizens no matter what geographic location or size of community, WACME and WACO created a policy platform that addressed three key elements: ensuring a uniform level of training for all practicing medical death investigators, that all autopsies would be conducted in facilities that meet national standards, and that all counties had access to a board-certified forensic pathologist.

Over the past several years WACME, WACO, and the legislature worked toward achieving this goal. First by addressing the funding mechanism for autopsy reimbursement rates and training dollars, second by providing a uniform case management system that all counties can utilize and access, and third by requiring all medical death investigators be nationally certified and that all autopsies be conducted in nationally accredited facilities by board-certified forensic pathologists.

In 1983 Washington created the death investigation account administered by the newly created Forensic Investigation Council and funded by a fee on copies of vital records to fund the death investigation system and to make related state and local institutions more efficient. A major component of the account was to fund autopsy reimbursements to local government. However, in 2017 and 2019 increased vital statistics fee funding the account to fund a statewide case management system and increased training requirements. Currently of the \$25 vital records fee, \$11 is sent to the death investigations account.

Yet these moves did not address a shortage of board-certified forensic pathologists working within Washington State. Washington, like most states in the nation, is facing a shortfall of pathologists. To address this issue WACME and WACO worked with Senator Dhingra on SB 5523 to provide both short term aid – and to look at long term sustainable solutions to bolster the supply of forensic pathologists.

In addition to allocating a Conrad 30 slot (J-1 Visa Waiver) through the Department of Health; SB 5523 created a tuition reimbursement model for pathologists serving in underserved counties in Washington, provided reimbursements to counties for the transport of bodies to accredited facilities, allocated marketing dollars for WACME to advertise to the medical community about working in Washington, and created a study to identify the wider issue and address potential long term, sustainable, solutions. The solutions being studied, among others, include setting up a new forensic pathology program in eastern Washington at the Washington

State University and increasing cohort sizes at the University of Washington among other scenarios.

Addressing the shortage of board-certified forensic pathologists is no easy task, the very fact that I am addressing this body today can attest to that fact. But it is my belief that with the collective minds and efforts of the education, medical, health care, and criminal justice communities we may be able to come up with solutions that are professional, accountable, and transparent for our communities.

Thank you for your time, I am happy to answer any questions.

Timothy Grisham, Deputy Director, Washington Association of County Officials