

SB 536 -1 STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY

House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care

Prepared By: Alexandra Kihn-Stang, LPRO Analyst

Meeting Dates: 4/22, 5/6

WHAT THE MEASURE DOES:

The measure expands the types of providers who may serve as medical examiners to include licensed physician associates and nurse practitioners, and clarifies that physicians serving in this role must be licensed.

Fiscal impact: No fiscal impact

Revenue impact: No revenue impact

SENATE VOTE: Ayes, 27; Nays, 2

ISSUES DISCUSSED:

- Increasing the number of medical examiners in Oregon, particularly in rural Oregon, by permitting physician associates and nurse practitioners to serve
- Responsibilities of a county medical examiner versus the Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office
- Other states that permit nurse practitioners and physician associates to serve as medical examiners
- Potential for issues related to pay parity for county medical examiners with different licenses

EFFECT OF AMENDMENT:

-1 Clarifies language. Specifies that an entity that certifies pathologists must be approved by the State Medical Examiner Advisory Board.

BACKGROUND:

House Bill 4003 ([2024](#)) directed the Oregon State Police to study the causes of, and solutions to, the shortage of medical examiners in Oregon. The resulting [State Medical Examiner System Analysis](#) report, informed by the Medical Examiner Improvement in Oregon Workgroup (MEIOW), was submitted to the Legislative Assembly in September of 2024. The report highlighted difficulties in staffing county-level medical examiner positions, partly due to a national shortage of forensic pathologists, and noted that medical examiner caseloads in Oregon are up to twice the nationally recommended level.

Each state determines its medicolegal death investigation (MDI) system, typically following one or a combination of three primary approaches. According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), 20 states utilize elected county coroners for their MDI system; 23 states, including Oregon, utilize medical examiners, typically relying on physicians and forensic pathologists, appointed at the county, regional, or state level, and six states rely on county level system that utilizes a different county official other than a coroner or medical examiner.

The Oregon State Police oversees the state medical examiner system. Until July 2023, the State Medical Examiner's Office also served as the county medical examiner for 14 counties. As of that date, counties became responsible for initial investigations, including signing death certificates, in routine cases that do not require direct examination by a forensic pathologist. Under current Oregon law ([ORS 146.003](#)), medical examiners must be physicians. However, county medical examiners in Oregon are not forensic pathologists, are not required to receive forensic training, and do not perform autopsies. In some cases that do not fall under the jurisdiction of a medical examiner, physician associates and nurse practitioners may serve as medical certifiers and sign death certificates ([ORS 432.133](#)).

Senate Bill 536 expands the types of providers who may serve as medical examiners to include licensed physician associates and nurse practitioners, and clarifies that physicians serving in this role must be licensed.

PRELIMINARY