

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 1069

As Passed House:
March 12, 1999

Title: An act relating to investigations of multiple deaths.

Brief Description: Authorizing the forensic investigations council to make expenditures to assist in investigations of multiple deaths.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Local Government (Originally sponsored by Representatives Scott, Mulliken and O'Brien).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Local Government: 2/1/99, 2/15/99 [DP];
Appropriations: 3/1/99, 3/3/99 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 3/12/99, 96-0.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Allows the Forensic Investigations Council to spend up to \$250,000 per biennium from the Death Investigations Account to assist local governments to investigate multiple deaths.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Mulliken, Republican Co-Chair; Scott, Democratic Co-Chair; Doumit, Democratic Vice Chair; Mielke, Republican Vice Chair; Edwards; Ericksen; Fisher and Fortunato.

Staff: Caroleen Dineen (786-7156).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 32 members: Representatives Huff, Republican Co-Chair; H. Sommers, Democratic Co-Chair; Alexander, Republican Vice Chair; Doumit, Democratic Vice Chair; D. Schmidt, Republican Vice Chair; Barlean; Benson; Boldt; Carlson; Clements; Cody; Crouse; Gombosky; Grant; Kagi; Keiser; Kenney; Kessler; Lambert; Linville; Lisk; Mastin; McIntire; McMorris; Mulliken; Parlette; Regala; Rockefeller; Ruderman; Sullivan; Tokuda and Wensman.

Staff: Heather Flodstrom (786-7391).

Background:

The Washington State Forensic Investigations Council (WSFIC) performs several functions related to death investigations as part of the state's criminal justice system. The WSFIC and the University of Washington jointly oversee the state toxicology laboratory and the state forensic pathology fellowship program. The WSFIC also approves the state crime laboratory and toxicology laboratory budgets. Further, the authorizing statute requires the WSFIC to study and recommend cost-efficient improvements to the state's death investigations system.

The Death Investigations Account (DIA) pays for various activities associated with death investigations and is funded from part of the fees received by the Department of Health for copies of vital records. The state treasurer makes disbursements from the DIA to the WSFIC and to various entities, including:

- the state toxicology laboratory;
- the Criminal Justice Training Commission for training county coroners;
- the Washington State Patrol for partial funding of the state dental identification system;
- the University of Washington to fund the state forensic pathology fellowship program;
- counties for the cost of autopsies; and
- medical examiners and their staff.

Summary of Bill:

The WSFIC is authorized to spend up to \$250,000 per biennium from the DIA appropriation to assist local jurisdictions to investigate multiple deaths involving unanticipated, extraordinary and catastrophic events, or involving multiple jurisdictions. The WSFIC is required to adopt rules for expending funds from the DIA for this purpose.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: (Local Government) Many local governments in Washington could go bankrupt if faced with a large-scale disaster such as a commercial airplane crash. The survivors of the disaster victims should not have to wait months for autopsy information until funds may become available to complete the investigations, and this bill may provide resources to conduct these investigations. Further, homicide investigation success decreases as investigation time increases, and this bill could assist in investigations such as those related to serial killers in multiple jurisdictions.

The WSFIC operates efficiently to coordinate and promote standards for quality of death investigations in the state, including coroner, medical examiner and death investigations training and other programs. County coroners and medical examiners have been integral in keeping down costs, and the DIA has maintained a balance at the end of the biennium. This bill allows the WSFIC to plan for the future and prepare for catastrophic events or disasters without an increase in fees or shifts from other programs. This bill is supported by the Washington Association of County Officials, the Washington State Association of Counties and the Washington State Patrol.

(Appropriations) (Original bill) This bill is necessary to provide a more timely response when investigating deaths from major catastrophes in local communities. DNA testing is important in death investigations, yet it is very expensive and won't always get done in smaller communities. This bill will help aid communities financially, so they can perform the proper death investigations in a timely manner. This bill is not a fee increase and does not shift any funds. It merely gives the Forensic Investigations Council the authority to expend funds from the Death Investigations Account. This bill would help a local jurisdiction if a catastrophe like the TWA Flight 800 crash happened in Washington. Families were left behind in that disaster because it took so long to investigate all of the deaths. Passing this bill will help prevent the investigation delay and emotional strain on families if a catastrophe like that happened in our state.

Testimony Against: (Local Government) None.

(Appropriations) None.

Testified: (Local Government) Debbie Wilkie, Deputy Director, Washington Association of County Officials (WACO) and Forensic Investigations Council; and Dale Brandland, Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC).

(Appropriations) Martha Reed, Washington Association of Medical Examiners and Coroners; and Debbie Wilke, Washington Association of County Officials and Forensic Investigations.