

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SSB 5545

---

---

As Passed Senate, April 14, 2003

**Title:** An act relating to fees for certified copies of vital records.

**Brief Description:** Using fees to develop and maintain a web-based vital records system.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Esser, Reardon, Poulsen, Sheahan and Winsley; by request of Department of Health).

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Technology & Communications: 2/13/03, 2/17/03 [DP-WM].

Ways & Means: 3/27/03, 4/1/03 [DPS].

Passed Senate: 4/14/03, 48-0.

---

### SENATE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY & COMMUNICATIONS

**Majority Report:** Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Esser, Chair; Finkbeiner, Vice Chair; Reardon, Schmidt and Stevens.

**Staff:** William Bridges (786-7424)

---

### SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

**Majority Report:** That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5545 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Rossi, Chair; Hewitt, Vice Chair; Zarelli, Vice Chair; Doumit, Fairley, Fraser, Hale, Johnson, Parlette, Regala, Sheahan, B. Sheldon and Winsley.

**Staff:** Tim Yowell (786-7435)

**Background:** Since 1907, the state Department of Health has maintained the state's vital records and statistics on births and deaths. Certified copies of birth and death certificates may be obtained either directly from the state Department of Health, or from local health departments. Since initiation of the state's Automated Birth Certificate system in 1992, approximately 85 percent of all certificates have come to be issued locally.

The fee for birth and death certificates is the same, whether the certificate is issued by the state or locally. Certified copies of birth and death certificates cost \$13 a copy. Additional copies of death certificates ordered at the same time as the first cost \$8 each.

Five dollars of each fee is placed in the "death investigations account," which funds, among other things, the state toxicology lab and county autopsy costs. The balance of the fee remains with the agency issuing the certificate. Locally collected fees are not shared with the Department of Health to support operation and maintenance of the statewide repository.

Fees were increased by \$2 in 1997 to support the death investigations account. The last fee increase to support general system operation was in 1988.

In 2002, the Legislature directed the Department of Health to study the feasibility of implementing an electronic death registration system. In January 2003, the department issued a report recommending development and implementation of such a system by 2005. The report also recommended a fee increase for certified copies of vital records to fund the project.

**Summary of Bill:** The state and local fee for all certified copies of birth and death certificates is raised to \$17. All fees paid locally stay with the local health jurisdiction, except for the following: (1) \$5 of each fee collected for birth certificates and death certificates is placed in the death investigations account; (2) \$2 of each fee is transferred to the Department of Health to support operation and maintenance of the statewide vital records system; and (3) \$7 of each fee collected for additional copies of death certificates ordered at the same time as the first copy go to the Department of Health to develop and maintain the state vital records system, including the implementation of a web-based electronic death registration system.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

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

**Testimony For (Technology & Communications):** The current paper system for registering deaths is time consuming and labor intensive. The bill will allow the department to create and maintain a secure and stable electronic death registration system. All the stakeholders agree that this bill will help families settle estates faster and cheaper. It will cut the current four- to six-week wait for a death certificate to one week. An electronic death registration system will advance the Governor's digital government initiative.

**Testimony Against (Technology & Communications):** None.

**Testified (Technology & Communications):** T.K. Bentler, WA State Funeral Dir. Assn. (pro); James Noel, WA State Funeral Dir. Assn.; (pro); Mary Selecky, Secretary, Dept. of Health (pro); Frank Westrum, Chief Tech. Officer, Dept. of Health (pro); Rick Wickman, WA Cemetery and Funeral Assn. (pro); Debbie Wilke, Forensic Investigations Council (pro).

**Testimony For (Ways & Means):** An electronic system will save considerable time for family members at a difficult time, and for funeral directors. Funeral directors are spending \$40-\$50 per death certificate right now, in time spent carrying the certificate to all the places it needs to go for signatures. Adequate funding for implementation of the system is essential if it is to operate smoothly and effectively for all concerned. Suggestions: It would be appropriate to sunset the fee increases for the web-based system in six or seven years, when the system is fully implemented.

**Testimony Against (Ways & Means):** None.

**Testified (Ways & Means):** PRO: Senator Luke Esser, prime sponsor (with suggestions); T.K. Bentler, WA State Funeral Directors Association (with suggestions); James Noel, WA State Funeral Directors Association; Tom Flintolt, Flintolt's Funeral Home; Mary Selecky, Department of Health.

**House Amendment(s):** The amended bill allows local registrars to collect an additional fee if payment is by credit card, charge card, debit card, smart card, stored value card, federal wire, and automated clearinghouse system, or other means of electronic communication.