

Local Government Committee

HB 2432

Brief Description: Concerning coroners.

Sponsors: Representatives Klippert and Goodman.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires that coroners, medical examiners, and the investigative employees of their offices, must complete medicolegal forensic investigation training developed by the Criminal Justice Training Commission within 12 months of assuming office.
- Requires coroner and medical examiner's offices to be accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners or the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners by July 1, 2024.
- Requires certification of a county's coroner or medical examiner before a county can be reimbursed for the cost of an autopsy.
- Repeals the mandate that elected prosecuting attorneys serve as ex-officio coroners in counties with a population of less than 40,000, as of January 1, 2027.

Hearing Date: 1/29/20

Staff: Kellen Wright (786-7134).

Background:

Every county in Washington has a coroner or medical examiner to conduct inquests, order autopsies, and to determine cause of death in certain cases. Whether a county has a coroner or medical examiner, and how that person is chosen for the position, is dependent on the size of the county and on whether the county is a charter county or a non-charter county. In a non-charter county with under 40,000 people, the elected prosecuting attorney serves as the ex-officio coroner. In a non-charter county above 40,000, but under 250,000, the position of coroner is elected. In a non-charter county with a population of 250,000 or more, the county legislative authority, with voter approval, may replace the position of coroner with that of a medical

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examiner. Medical examiners are appointed rather than elected, and must either be certified as a forensic pathologist or be a qualified physician eligible to take the pathology certification within one year of being appointed. A physician who specializes in pathology but who is not certified as a forensic pathologist has three years to pass the examination.

In the seven charter counties, five have appointed a medical examiner, while two maintain the prosecuting attorney as the coroner.

The cost of an autopsy is borne by the county in which the autopsy is performed. Some of these costs, however, are reimbursed from the death investigations account. Reimbursed costs include 40 percent of the cost of contracting for an outside pathologist and 25 percent of the salary for an internal pathologist.

Summary of Bill:

Within 12 months of assuming office as either coroner or medical examiner, or as an investigator in such an office, the coroner, medical examiner, or employee must have completed medicolegal forensic investigation training that complies with standards set by the Criminal Justice Training Commission. This training program must meet the recommendations made by the National Commission on Forensic Science and must include training on sudden, unexplained infant death and on missing persons protocols. Completion of this training is a requirement of continued employment with a coroner or medical examiner's office. These training requirements do not apply to elected prosecutors who serve as coroners. Coroner and medical examiner's offices not certified as satisfying these requirements will not be reimbursed for the cost of an autopsy until certification is achieved. For an accredited office, the rate of reimbursement is 30 percent of the salary of a pathologist who works for the office.

Additionally, other than those offices run by a prosecuting attorney, all coroner and medical examiner offices must be accredited by either the National Association of Medical Examiners or the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners by July 1, 2024, and must maintain the accreditation thereafter.

Beginning on January 1, 2027, the elected prosecutor will no longer be the ex-officio coroner in non-charter counties with under 40,000 people.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 20, 2020.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.