AN ACT Relating to coroners and medical examiners; amending RCW 36.16.030, 68.50.104, and 68.50.010; adding new sections to chapter 36.24 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 43.101 RCW; and providing an effective date.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. Sec. 1. A new section is added to chapter 36.24 RCW to read as follows:

Within 12 months of assuming office, a person who files a declaration of candidacy for the office of coroner or county medical examiner must have a certificate of completion of medicolegal forensic investigation training that complies with the standards adopted for the medicolegal training academy adopted by the criminal justice training commission in conjunction with the Washington association of coroners and medical examiners and a practicing physician selected by the commission pursuant to section 3 of this act. A county in which the coroner or county medical examiner has not obtained such certification within 12 months of assuming office is ineligible to receive reimbursement from the death investigations account under RCW 68.50.104.
NEW SECTION.  Sec. 2. A new section is added to chapter 36.24 RCW to read as follows:

Except those run by a county prosecutor, all county coroner's offices and medical examiner's offices must be accredited by either the international association of coroners and medical examiners or the national association of medical examiners no later than July 1, 2025, and maintain continued accreditation thereafter. A county that contracts for its coroner or medical examiner services with an accredited coroner or medical examiner's office in another county does not need to maintain accreditation.

NEW SECTION.  Sec. 3. A new section is added to chapter 43.101 RCW to read as follows:

(1)(a) All elected coroners, persons serving as coroners, medical examiners, and all other full-time medicolegal investigative personnel employed by a county coroner's or medical examiner's office must successfully complete medicolegal forensic investigation training through the medicolegal training academy program within 12 months of being elected, appointed, or employed unless otherwise exempted by the commission. This section does not apply to elected prosecutors who are coroners in their counties.

(b) All part-time medicolegal investigative personnel employed by a county coroner's or medical examiner's office must successfully complete medicolegal forensic investigation training through the medicolegal training academy program within 18 months of being employed unless otherwise exempted by the commission.

(2) The commission, in conjunction with the Washington association of coroners and medical examiners and a practicing physician selected by the commission, shall develop the medicolegal forensic investigation training curriculum and adopt the standards for the medicolegal training academy and any exemption from the requirement to complete the medicolegal training academy. The commission shall exempt from this requirement any coroner, medical examiner, or medicolegal investigative personnel who has obtained training comparable to the medicolegal training academy by virtue of educational or professional training or experience.

(3) The commission must certify successful completion of the medicolegal training academy or exemption from the medicolegal training academy within 60 days from the receipt of proof of completion or request for exemption.
(4) The medicolegal forensic investigation training required under this section must:
   (a) Meet the recommendations of the national commission on forensic science for certification and accreditation; and
   (b) Satisfy the requirements for training on the subject of sudden, unexplained child death including, but not limited to, sudden infant death syndrome developed pursuant to RCW 43.103.100 and missing persons protocols pursuant to RCW 43.103.110.

(5) Certification under this section is a condition of continued employment in a coroner's or medical examiner's office.

(6) A coroner's or medical examiner's office in which a coroner, person serving as coroner, medical examiner, or other medicolegal investigative employee, who has not otherwise been exempted by the commission, is not certified within 12 months of being elected, appointed, or employed as required by this section, is not eligible for reimbursement from the death investigations account under RCW 68.50.104 until the office is in compliance with all requirements under this section.

Sec. 4. RCW 36.16.030 and 2015 c 53 s 61 are each amended to read as follows:

Except as provided elsewhere in this section, in every county there shall be elected from among the qualified voters of the county a county assessor, a county auditor, a county clerk, a county coroner, three county commissioners, a county prosecuting attorney, a county sheriff, and a county treasurer, except that in each county with a population of less than forty thousand no coroner shall be elected and the prosecuting attorney shall be ex officio coroner. Whenever the population of a county increases to forty thousand or more, the prosecuting attorney shall continue as ex officio coroner until a coroner is elected, at the next general election at which the office of prosecuting attorney normally would be elected, and assumes office as provided in RCW 29A.60.280. In any county where the population has once attained forty thousand people and a current coroner is in office and a subsequent census indicates less than forty thousand people, the county legislative authority may maintain the office of coroner by resolution or ordinance. If the county legislative authority has not passed a resolution or enacted an ordinance to maintain the office of coroner, the elected coroner shall remain in office for the remainder of the term for which he or
she was elected, but no coroner shall be elected at the next election at which that office would otherwise be filled and the prosecuting attorney shall be the ex officio coroner). In a county with a population of two hundred fifty thousand or more, the county legislative authority may replace the office of coroner with a medical examiner system and appoint a medical examiner as specified in RCW 36.24.190. A noncharter county may have five county commissioners as provided in RCW 36.32.010 and 36.32.055 through 36.32.0558.

Sec. 5. RCW 68.50.104 and 2019 c 317 s 4 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The cost of autopsy shall be borne by the county in which the autopsy is performed, except when requested by the department of labor and industries, in which case, the department shall bear the cost of such autopsy.

(2)(a) Except as provided in (b) of this subsection, when the county bears the cost of an autopsy, it shall be reimbursed from the death investigations account, established by RCW 43.79.445, as follows:

(i) Up to forty percent of the cost of contracting for the services of a pathologist to perform an autopsy;

(ii) Up to (twenty-five) 30 percent of the salary of pathologists who are primarily engaged in performing autopsies and are (A) county coroners or county medical examiners, or (B) employees of a county coroner or county medical examiner; and

(iii) One hundred percent of the cost of autopsies conducted under RCW 70.54.450.

(b) When the county bears the cost of an autopsy of a child under the age of three whose death was sudden and unexplained, the county shall be reimbursed for the expenses of the autopsy when the death scene investigation and the autopsy have been conducted under RCW 43.103.100 (4) and (5), and the autopsy has been done at a facility designed for the performance of autopsies.

(3) Payments from the account shall be made pursuant to biennial appropriation: PROVIDED, That no county may reduce funds appropriated for this purpose below 1983 budgeted levels.

(4) Where the county coroner's office or county medical examiner's office is not accredited pursuant to section 2 of this act, or a coroner, medical examiner, or other medicolegal
investigative employee is not certified as required by section 3 of this act, the state treasurer's office shall withhold autopsy reimbursement funds until accreditation under section 2 of this act or compliance with section 3 of this act is achieved.

Sec. 6. RCW 68.50.010 and 1963 c 178 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

The jurisdiction of bodies of all deceased persons who come to their death suddenly when in apparent good health without medical attendance within the thirty-six hours preceding death; or where the circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means; or where death occurs under suspicious circumstances; or where a coroner's autopsy or postmortem or coroner's inquest is to be held; or where death results from unknown or obscure causes, or where death occurs within one year following an accident; or where the death is caused by any violence whatsoever, or where death results from a known or suspected abortion; whether self-induced or otherwise; where death apparently results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation or smothering; or where death is due to premature birth or still birth; or where death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease which may be a public health hazard; or where death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge or sodomy, where death occurs in a jail or prison; where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends, is hereby vested in the county coroner or medical examiner, which bodies may be removed and placed in the morgue under such rules as are adopted by the coroner or medical examiner with the approval of the county commissioners, having jurisdiction, providing therein how the bodies shall be brought to and cared for at the morgue and held for the proper identification where necessary.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 7. Section 4 of this act takes effect January 1, 2025.