
Local Government Committee

HB 2132

Brief Description: Reducing training costs for small county offices of coroners or medical examiners.

Sponsors: Representatives Schmick, Graham and Dent.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Exempts coroner's offices in counties with fewer than 40,000 people from medicolegal forensic investigative training and office accreditation requirements.

Hearing Date: 1/17/24

Staff: Kellen Wright (786-7134).

Background:

Every county in Washington has either a coroner or medical examiner to investigate deaths, conduct inquests, order autopsies, and to determine cause of death in certain cases, or contracts with another county for such services. Until January 1, 2025, in counties with fewer than 40,000 people, the prosecutor acts as ex officio coroner. Thereafter, those counties will either elect a coroner or the county legislative authority may appoint a coroner. In larger counties, coroners are elected unless the county legislative authority has replaced the office of coroner with a medical examiner's office. This option is only available in counties with 250,000 or more people.

In 2021, the Legislature adopted new training requirements for coroners, medical examiners, and medicolegal investigative personnel, and new accreditation requirements for coroner's and medical examiner's offices in Washington.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Training Requirements.

Within 12 months of being elected, appointed, or hired, a coroner, medical examiner, or full-time medicolegal investigative employee must complete medicolegal forensic investigation training that complies with standards adopted by the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC), the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners, and a practicing physician selected by the CJTC. Part-time medicolegal investigative personnel have 18 months to complete the training. The training must meet recommendations of the National Commission on Forensic Science for certification and accreditation, and must include training on the subject of unexplained child death.

The CJTC may adopt standards for exemptions from the training requirement and must exempt anyone otherwise subject to the training requirement that has obtained comparable training, including through professional experience.

Completion of the training is a condition of continued employment in a coroner's or medical examiner's office.

A prosecutor serving in an ex officio capacity is exempt from the requirement to complete Medicolegal Forensic Investigation Training. After January 1, 2025, when the prosecutor ceases to act as ex officio coroner in counties with fewer than 40,000 people, the newly elected or appointed coroner would be required to complete the training.

Accreditation.

All coroner's and medical examiner's offices, except those run by a county prosecutor, must be accredited by either the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners or the National Association of Medical Examiners by July 1, 2025, and must maintain that accreditation thereafter.

The Death Investigations Account.

The Death Investigations Account is funded by fees charged for certified or informational copies of certain vital records, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, and the like. The fee for these records is \$25, of which \$11 goes to the Death Investigations Account.

The Death Investigations Account is used to fund, among other things, reimbursement to counties for a portion of the costs of autopsies within the county, and to the CJTC for training courses for coroners, medical examiners, and their staff.

If a coroner's or medical examiner's office is not accredited as required, or the required trainings have not been completed, then the State Treasurer must withhold 25 percent of the autopsy reimbursement funds otherwise due to the county from the Death Investigations Account until the coroner's or medical examiner's office comes into compliance.

Summary of Bill:

The medicolegal forensic investigation training requirements do not apply to coroners and

medicolegal investigative personnel in counties with fewer than 40,000 people. Likewise, the office accreditation requirements do not apply to a coroner's office in a county with fewer than 40,000 people.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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