

FINAL BILL REPORT

SSB 5523

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Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Addressing the forensic pathologist shortage.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Higher Education & Workforce Development (originally sponsored by Senators Dhingra, Conway, Nobles, Shewmake, Trudeau and Wilson, C.).

Senate Committee on Higher Education & Workforce Development
Senate Committee on Ways & Means
House Committee on Postsecondary Education & Workforce
House Committee on Appropriations

Background: Forensic Pathologists. Every county in Washington has a coroner or medical examiner to investigate deaths, conduct inquests, order autopsies, and to determine cause of death in certain cases. 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 who is primarily engaged in performing autopsies, and who is a coroner or medical examiner or an employee of the office.

Washington State Forensics Investigations Council. The Washington State Forensics Investigations Council (WSFIC) oversees the Bureau of Forensic Laboratory Services and, in consultation with the chief of the Washington State Patrol or the chief's designee, control the operation and establish policies of the Bureau of Forensic Laboratory Services. Members are appointed by the Governor, and include but are not limited to a county coroner, county prosecutor, county medical examiner, and chief of police.

Washington Health Corps. The Washington Health Corps was established in 2019 to encourage health care professionals to work in shortage areas by providing loan repayment. The Washington Health Corps is an umbrella program under which three loan repayment programs are placed: the Health Professional Loan Repayment and Conditional Scholarship Program, the Behavioral Health Loan Repayment program, and the Nurse Educator Loan

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.

Repayment Program. The programs provide licensed professionals with repayment on all or a portion of participants' outstanding student loans in exchange for service at an eligible site. Eligible sites are health care facilities that provide comprehensive outpatient, ambulatory, and primary health care services.

All programs are administered by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), in collaboration with the Department of Health (DOH), under the same structure and application process. The programs provide a maximum loan repayment award of \$75,000 for a minimum three-year service obligation of full-time employment. A participant is required to work at least a 24-hour work week, and is allowed 40 days per year in leave. If the participant works less than a full-time work schedule, the employment is the prorated equivalent for up to five years. The programs differ in who is eligible, and what the eligible shortage areas are.

Summary: The forensic pathologist loan repayment program is created for board certified forensic pathologists providing services in identified shortage areas. Identified shortage areas are those areas where qualified forensic pathologists are in short supply because of geographic maldistribution or where vacancies exist that may compromise death investigations. WSFIC must assist WSAC in identifying shortage areas. The program shall be administered under the Washington Health Corps program umbrella.

The program provides up to \$25,000 in loan repayment, per year per participant, for up to four years. Participants are required to complete their four-year service obligation, or be required to repay the program. The repayment is equal to the unsatisfied portion of the service obligation, or the total amount paid by the program, whichever is less. Payment is due immediately, though a payment schedule with interest may be provided for those who cannot pay.

DOH, in consultation with WSFIC and other stakeholders, may provide technical assistance to counties desiring to become sponsoring communities for the purposes of identification of prospective students for the program. From the amounts appropriated for the program, DOH must enter into a contract for a two-year marketing plan advertising Washington State to potential board certified pathologists.

The Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners must conduct a study of the critical shortage of board-certified forensic pathologists. The study must cover issues related to Conrad J-1 visa waivers, and measures to encourage enrollment in the state's pathology residency programs. The study must provide recommendations on how to create two new forensic pathology fellow opportunities. A report with recommendations is due to the Legislature by October 1, 2024.

Allowable uses for the death investigations account are modified to allow coroners to receive up to 40 percent of the cost of transportation of remains between facilities for autopsy services.

Votes on Final Passage:

Senate	48	0	
House	98	0	(House amended)
Senate	48	0	(Senate concurred)

Effective: July 23, 2023