

Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Nelson and Goodwin and Members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Kimberly Repp, and I am the Supervisor for the Medical Examiner's Office, and the Research, Analytics, Informatics and Data Program, and I am the Chief Epidemiologist for Washington County. I am an affiliate member of the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) and one of 15 forensic epidemiologists in the country.

I am here to testify in support of HB 4003. The medical examiner system is critical to Oregon for two main reasons:

- 1) Public Health – Medical examiners play a critical role in public health through death investigations. For example, we would not know about the severity of the fentanyl crisis without medical examiners, nor would we know our suicide rates, or the disproportionate acts of violence experienced by some of our community members. What gets measured, is improved. The Medical Examiner system provides the foundational measurement of population health.
- 2) Community Safety – Medical examiners are equally as important as law enforcement, district attorneys and defense attorneys as they play a critical role in providing scene and physical evidence, in addition to expert witness testimony to help determine who should or should not be charged with a crime. Medical Examiners are responsible for scientifically introducing forensic fingerprinting, DNA and toxicology into the legal system. Justice cannot and does not happen without Medical Examiners.

However, Oregon's medical examiner system continues to struggle. One of the reasons is because of a severe shortage of Medical Examiners [\(ref\)](#). The level of training and education expected from a medical examiner in the US requires an additional 4-7 years of training beyond medical school. This shortage crisis is not unique to Oregon, or even the United States, however Oregon has struggled to position itself to get out of this crisis. Last session the Oregon State Police successfully advocated for salaries for state medical examiners to reach the top third of salaries nationwide. This *may* help keep our existing Medical Examiners from being poached from other offices, but there is much more to work to do because of the competitive environment we are in nationally.

I want the committee to understand the severity of the current situation and the help that is needed. Even with more medical examiners, there is so much work to be done to function at the level expected by our communities: the state facilities are too small and have been overgrown for years, there isn't enough body storage, and staffing is significantly less than it should be to even handle the current caseload. Due to this lack of staffing, our State Medical Examiner's Office has had to restrict the criteria for decedents who receive a full autopsy. This puts the county death investigation staff in the unenviable position of explaining to yet another family why their loved one cannot have an autopsy. As you might imagine saying "staffing issues" doesn't cut it.

In this most recent weather event when much of NW of Oregon was closed, Washington County, my office, did not have a place to store decedents who couldn't be transported due to the severe weather. This was and is a very disconcerting status of operations.

Last session after seeing this crisis play out, the Oregon State Police at the behest of counties stood up the Medical Examiner Improvement in Oregon Workgroup. While those policy

recommendations are forthcoming by May of this year, we want to ensure that those recommendations are supplemented, operationalized, and strengthened via this new workgroup with additional parties including legislators who were not able to be at the table for that workgroup. We have identified several legislators who are passionate about these reforms. Fundamentally, we want to ensure that we are ready for a robust advocacy plan for the 2025 long session with legislative champions ready to help guide our package.

While we have waited and hoped for policy, funding, and innovative changes to arrive in Oregon, other states, like Washington and other counties in the U.S., are already acting, as you will hear shortly. We know we have assets in Oregon that we can utilize.

State law requires accreditation for law enforcement, but the state medical examiner's office has never been expected to become nationally accredited. We should push for accreditation via the National Association of Medical Examiners within a decade, and we should see counties provided with a sustainable funding model to best serve all Oregonians. This bill is an opportunity to change our future which why we urge you to pass it.

We are grateful for Rep. Wallan's strategic vision and partnership. I am happy to answer your questions, as well as my colleague Zakir Khan who advocates for us as part of Washington County's Government Relations team.