

February 6, 2026

Senate Committee on Judiciary
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: Senate Bill 1550 Concerns

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and committee members,

The Multnomah County Health Department, which includes the county Medical Examiner's office, submits the following testimony regarding serious concerns with the proposal of changes to ORS 146, as written in SB 1550. Multnomah County respectfully opposes this bill as introduced.

The Multnomah County Medical Examiner's office is dedicated to the investigation of deaths involving those who are victims of domestic violence and intimate partner violence. We support the thorough investigation of these deaths, but SB 1550 would not achieve its intended goals. Instead, medical examiner operations would be strained as autopsies would be required in many non-suspicious deaths, and families would be prevented from denying autopsies, in those cases, for personal or religious reasons.

We are not aware of any statistics to support the proposed changes to medical examiner practice. SB 1550 as written (even with Amendment 1), is done so without reasonable considerations of the impact on medical examiner operations. The Multnomah County Medical Examiner's Office, which serves the largest population in Oregon, has not been consulted on the language of this bill, but our county resources would be significantly impacted as it would greatly increase the number of cases that meet criteria for autopsy.

Under this proposal, the following scenarios would qualify for an autopsy under SB 1550:

1. A motor vehicle accident where a 30 year old male leaves the roadway and strikes a tree. He was alone in the car, it was a witnessed accident, and he was moved by paramedics to the hospital (moved from the original scene). This would meet the following criteria under SB 1550:
 - The scene of death suggests the appearance of death by suicide, overdose or accident
 - The decedent died prematurely or in an untimely death
 - The body of the decedent has been moved from the location where death occurred or the scene of death or other evidence otherwise appears altered.

2. A male in his 60s, who has not been to see his primary care provider recently, who died at home, witnessed by his partner, of an undermined cause, presumed natural. This would meet the following criteria under SB 1550:

- The decedent is found dead in a home or place of residence
- The decedent is found by the partner
- Undetermined cause of death
- The decedent was last seen alive by a family or household member, the child of the decedent, the child of a family or household member or, if the decedent was a minor child as described in paragraph (e) of this subsection, the child's parent, guardian or caregiver who was the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator of such abuse.
- A family or household member had control of the scene of death before law enforcement arrived or, if the decedent was a minor child as described in paragraph (e) of this subsection, the child's parent, guardian or caregiver who was the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator of such abuse had control of the scene of death before law enforcement arrived.

Additionally, SB 1550 as introduced does not consider some of the basic functions of the medical examiner system. Law enforcement does not determine the cause and manner of death. Officers are not trained on death investigation, complex medical diagnoses, medical terminology, interactions of drugs/medications and anatomy. The medical examiner (physician) is the only entity that determines cause and manner of death in deaths that occur outside of a hospital. The State Medical Examiner has nine board-certified forensic pathologists who conduct autopsies for the state of Oregon. In the larger counties, law enforcement does not conduct death investigations. Trained and certified medicolegal death investigators conduct thorough scene investigations, perform interviews with families and witnesses, and coordinate the level of appropriate examination with the State Medical Examiner. The only exception to this standard is homicide cases, where law enforcement takes the lead on interviews and meticulously documenting the scene (criminalists).

It is important to note that county medical examiner offices around the state function differently. For example, Multnomah County has the largest population and a robust death investigation system, which is consistent in the tri-county area as well as in several other counties in Oregon. Senate Bill 1550 would disproportionately impact larger counties simply based on the larger number of overall cases and of cases involving suicide and accidents, which include overdose deaths (overdose deaths are listed as suicide or accident in manner of death).

Strong family wishes or oppositions to autopsies are always considered, as are religious practices

surrounding death. We are concerned that SB 1550 will remove the decision from families opposed to autopsy for personal or religious beliefs.

In Section 5, (5)(b)(A)(ii), regarding a family's request for photos, families are already entitled to receive autopsy photographs from the medical examiner upon request.

In summary, we believe the criteria listed in this bill are overly broad and would require autopsy resources for a wide range of deaths that have no relation to domestic violence or intimate partner violence.

Sincerely,

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