

Good morning Chair Taylor, Vice-chair Hayden and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Ricki Rogers, and I am a medicolegal death investigator (MDI). I am here today to quantify the services that medicolegal death investigators provide to the community every day, including public health and safety functions. I am providing this testimony as an AFSCME Local 88 union steward and a fellow Oregonian. I have held my current position for over 4 years and have nearly 8 years of experience in this field. I am a diplomat of the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) and a current graduate student in the field of Forensic Medicine.

Medicolegal death investigators respond to death scenes in every part of their jurisdiction, far and wide. Like police and fire, the medical examiner's office is a 24/7 operation. Death does not follow any calendar we can understand. We respond to scenes alongside law enforcement, and oftentimes to their relief. We are sometimes referred to as "last responders" because we arrive after life-saving measures have ended, while hazardous conditions, emotionally charged circumstances, and legal ramifications remain. Our duties begin where police and fire duties transition, not where risks disappear.

As last responders, medicolegal death investigators respond to deaths of all manners, including natural deaths, accidents, homicides, suicides, and sometimes those under unknown circumstances. These scenes can include infant and child deaths, overdoses, suicidal hangings (sometimes in public), motor vehicle accidents, decomposed individuals, and so many more. The circumstances surrounding a death are infinite, but we are always equipped to show up, investigate, and comfort those left behind. Our responsibilities go far beyond decedent transport and disposition. We counsel families on choosing funeral homes, perform external examinations, retrieve postmortem specimens for toxicology testing, fingerprint decedents to ensure they are scientifically identified, and make the difficult phone calls to notify families that their loved ones are gone. Notably, we frequently do all of these things in one day. Once those tasks are complete, we write comprehensive reports that are ultimately released to families and, in some cases, to the media. Our job description simply cannot encompass the broad range of moral and legal obligations we adhere to.

In regard to public health and safety, we provide the necessary data for all of you to advocate for more funding towards homeless services, drug and alcohol treatment, and suicide prevention. You know homicide rates have decreased across the state because we reported it to you. You are aware of just how much Oregon has been affected by the fentanyl crisis because we are thorough in the testing that we do to ensure that the

numbers reflect the reality on the ground. In the unfortunate circumstance of a mass casualty event, such as a plane crash or mass shooting, which have become far too common in this country, we are trained and ready to respond in full force to ensure the dignity in death that everyone deserves. Whether a decedent is found in a body of water, their home, or on a public sidewalk, we will be there. When a decedent is discovered by a loved one who only knows to call the police, the police call **us**. When an individual dies in the hospital of a disease that is a public health hazard, hospital staff call **us**. We were considered essential workers during the pandemic, which, as you can imagine, significantly increased the number of deaths we were required to investigate. In the early days of COVID-19, when most people were still trying to sort through the data on contagion and risk, we put on our uniforms and cared for the most vulnerable populations, not unlike police officers and firefighters.

The trauma and hazards that medicolegal death investigators face closely mirror those in law enforcement and fire services. We are regularly exposed to hazardous materials, infectious diseases, extreme temperatures, and unsafe environments. While safety risks can be minimized, they cannot be completely eliminated. The traumatic environments we encounter are abundant. We frequently carry deceased children out of their homes, pull decedents out of burnt and mangled vehicles, and document gruesome injuries of all kinds. As medicolegal death investigators, we are not immune or strangers to loss. Many of us began this career in the face of our own personal tragedies. We carry the grief of others, even when carrying our own.

We are, unfortunately, forgotten in the background of public service because it can be uncomfortable to think about the work we do. That is, until it is needed. I am humbly asking for your support of SB 1569, which aligns medicolegal death investigators into PER's Police and Fire. Like many classifications in this bill, our counterparts employed by other employers across the state already receive this enhanced retirement benefit.

Former British Prime Minister Sir William Ewart Gladstone said it best: "Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its death, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals".

Respectfully,

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