



DATE: March 28, 2024

TO: Whatcom County Council

FROM: Satpal Sidhu, County Executive
Tyler Schroeder, Deputy Executive

RE: Medical Examiner Update – Transfer from Contracted to County Employment

The purpose of this memo is to provide Council with an update on the efforts to bring the Medical Examiner and staff into County employment.

On November 21, 2023 the County Council approved the mid biennium budget adjustments which included additional budget authority and position control necessary to bring the Medical Examiner and her staff into Whatcom County employment. In preparing that budget supplemental request, the Administration reviewed comparable counties, industry standards and county staffing policies which resulted in a salary package that is commensurate to our comparable counties. As one of the only Washington State Counties that contracts for this vital service we welcome the opportunity to employ the Medical Examiner and staff. We also recognize that Whatcom County is fortunate to have the full-time services of a Medical Examiner/Forensic Pathologist. For the last decade there has been a persistent shortage in forensic pathologists both locally and nationally and the problem continues to worsen. So serious is the problem, the Washington State legislation unanimously passed [SB5523](#), the Forensic Pathologist Workforce bill which serves to address the forensic pathologist shortage.

While there are many benefits to bringing the Medical Examiner Office into County employment, establishing a more permanent department is at the top of the list. This transition will help retain trained investigators and staff in a profession where recruitment is in high demand. County employment also allows for more oversight of these critical services provided on behalf of Whatcom County and its citizens. Additionally, Whatcom County will more effectively secure ownership of the medical examiner records which are maintained under the custody of the County. The County will also benefit from new and innumerable grant opportunities available to help fund new equipment, technology and other resources that will ultimately help to improve the department.

Transitioning from a 30-year legacy with our former ME during a pandemic was no easy task. Under the direction and leadership of Dr. Hunt, her office took on the challenge of digitizing and transferring 30 years of ME records to a digital record keeping system. She acquired new equipment and continues to foster collaborative relations with all stakeholders. In 2023, she organized a two-day training seminar inviting national forensic experts and other leaders in her field to share their knowledge with partner agencies and stakeholders including law enforcement agencies and medical and service providers. The two-day event was well attended and received good reviews. So successful, Dr. Hunt is organizing another training event to take place in May

of this year. And just recently, at the request of the Search and Rescue organization her office held a well-received training. Attendees of that training are likely to join the May event as well.

In Spring 2023, the ME Office found themselves displaced due to the renovation project taking place at their State Street facility. The Medical Examiner was hugely instrumental in finding a new temporary facility to continue performing autopsies without disruption to her work. To date, Dr. Hunt has continued to conduct her work while she and her administrative staff have worked in a temporary, cramped office space located in the basement of the courthouse. The ME Office pursued and was successfully awarded a formula grant for the acquisition of a new portable X-Ray machine. The new X-Ray machine will effectively eliminate the need to contract for X-Ray services, saving \$25,000/year. Once a part of Whatcom County more grant funding opportunities can be realized.

To initiate the transition, Human Resources prepared an amendment to the Unrepresented Resolution which adds the terms and conditions of employment for the Medical Examiner. The remaining positions listed below are covered under current policies.

Human Resources prepared job descriptions for the following full-time positions:

- Medical Examiner (appointed)
- Operations Manager
- Autopsy Technician
- Medicolegal Death Investigator (3)

Because services provided are needed 24/7 there is also a need for on-call part-time staff. Part-time staffing allows for timely and efficient responses for the 24/7 operation of the Medical Examiner Office. The 2024 budget includes funding for extra help staffing to be used as needed for on-call scheduling.

Part-time staffing includes:

- On-call Investigator
- Autopsy Technician
- Family Liaison

Thanks to the efforts of Human Resources we are ready to begin recruitment for these Whatcom County positions in May. We anticipate existing staff to apply as well as new applicants. The current timeline is as follows:

March 29	Completion of draft job descriptions
April 5	Notice to union of new department and positions
April 23	Amendment to Unrepresented Resolution
May 3	Recruitment for positions
May 31	Complete any impact bargaining regarding 24/7 coverage
July 7	Suggested start date for new staff (beginning pay period)

There are many benefits to bringing the Medical Examiner Office into county employment and we look forward to closing the circle and stabilizing this valuable community services for decades to come.