



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Secretary

March 29, 2022

The Honorable Delores G. Kelley
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
3 East, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: HB 373 – State Postmortem Examiners Commission - Minimum Staffing Requirements – Letter of Information

Dear Chair Kelley and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) respectfully submits this letter of information on House Bill (HB) 373 – State Postmortem Examiners Commission - Minimum Staffing Requirements. HB 373 as amended will require MDH to ensure that the number of staff employed by the Commission does not fall to a level that would constitute a Phase II violation according to the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME).

The State Post Mortem Examiners Commission (PMEC), a statutorily independent MDH unit, is responsible for recruiting additional forensic pathologists and support staff for the Maryland Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) and providing oversight of OCME. Shifting the responsibility for ensuring certain staff levels within an independent unit to MDH without also providing MDH the authority to hire creates operational and organizational barriers.

MDH continues to aggressively support the OCME. We highlight below the work MDH has been doing during the last year and more, with the State Post Mortem Examiners Commission (PMEC), to reinforce the work of the OCME.

- **Forensic pathologist salaries in Maryland** have increased by over 50 percent since October 2020 – and have nearly *doubled* since 2014 – and **are among the highest salaries in the country.**
 - **The range as of January 2022 for an Assistant Medical Examiner, Board Certified (AME) is \$238,842 to \$370,086.** These figures also reflect a 3 percent increase as part of the salary enhancements provided for in Governor Hogan's FY2023 budget proposal. For more information, please see the attached Joint Chairmen's Report (updated on February 3, 2022)
 - In 2016, the salary range for an AME was \$152,319 - \$254,576.
 - In 2014, the salary range for an AME was \$120,391 - \$198,615.
- **We are assigning 21 new positions at OCME:** Four positions were already assigned by MDH to OCME in FY2022, and 17 additional PINs reassigned to OCME in the FY 2023 allowance. These new positions include: additional AMEs, forensic investigators, assistant toxicologists, autopsy assistants, and administrative support professionals.

- We are also discussing additional retention options with the P MEC and the Maryland Department of Budget and Management.
- An Annual Salary Review (ASR) was approved for autopsy assistants in 2019. In addition, an ASR was approved for Forensic investigators in FY2023.
- The OCME is also in the process of identifying additional forensic pathologists who may be able to work on a per diem basis to assist with autopsies.
- We requested federal assistance the week of February 4, 2022, and on February 11, 2022, the federal government approved our request. FEMA sent a total of six (6) professionals: two (2) teams, each consisting of three (3) professionals.
- We have approved a capital project to add permanent cold storage capacity at the OCME office, which will move forward. In the meantime, we have also funded additional temporary cold storage.
- A new CT scanner has been purchased, with anticipated installation in March 2022.

There is a crucial national forensic pathologists workforce shortage, with only about 750 board-certified forensic pathologists currently working in the country, according to NAME. Furthermore, a 2019 U.S. Department of Justice report stated that the total estimated national need was 1,100-1,200 forensic pathologists. This workforce shortage, alongside the national demand, creates a difficult recruitment environment for all medical examiner and coroner offices across the United States.

As is the case throughout the country, OCME is facing staffing-related challenges, and in particular a shortage of forensic pathologists. In addition, COVID-19 has contributed to staff absences. Furthermore, OCME handles many homicides and opioid-related deaths, which are resource-intensive cases.

Throughout this process, we have worked closely with the P MEC, including its chair, Dr. Sanford Stass and vice-chair Dr. Ralph Hruban, to find solutions to increase resources as well as enhance the processes within OCME. MDH is currently performing direct outreach to qualified professionals who may be interested, or have contacts who are interested, in filling vacancies at OCME.

If you have any questions, please contact Heather Shek, Director of Governmental Affairs, at heather.shek@maryland.gov or 410-260-3190.

Sincerely,



Dennis R. Schrader
Secretary