

TESTIMONY TO THE INTERIM HEALTH SERVICES COMMITTEE

Prepared April 24, 2014 by
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REGARDING COUNTY CORONER COSTS

Madam Chair and members of the Interim Health Services Committee – our Association was asked to provide information about the county coroner system and its costs to county property tax payers. We are very pleased to provide you the results of our efforts to respond to this request.

I would like to begin by mentioning that the state/county relationship regarding coroner/medical examiner services (and costs) was changed with the creation of the office of the State Forensic Examiner in 1995 and modified somewhat again in 2009 with the repeal of Chapter 11-19 and the overhaul of Chapter 11-19.1.

Prior to the creation of the forensic examiner's office, the counties were largely responsible for death investigations from start to finish. The increasing costs of contract autopsies began to stress county budgets. The Legislature wanted to improve the system while taking away the perceived disincentive to requesting necessary autopsies, by shifting that part of the cost to the State. It was felt however that there needed to be a balance, and the cost of the local coroners, and the cost of transporting bodies for autopsy, when necessary, should remain with the county. Additionally, the forensic examiner was given greater authority over the qualifications of those appointed as county coroners.

To better describe the county coroner system, the counties were surveyed about their current coroner arrangement and their costs. The results of the survey have been compiled into the attached tables.

To summarize Table 1, 27 counties contract with 22 different medical professionals for coroner services – 24 of which are medical doctors and 3 are registered nurses. Cass County is unique in contracting with the city Health

Department for a medical doctor to serve as coroner, while also directly employing two coroner’s assistants.

Medical Doctor	23
Registered Nurse	3
UND Med.School	1
Funeral Director	11
Assigned-Sheriff	13
Assigned-EM/911	1
Police Chief	1
Total 53	

The sheriffs in thirteen counties have been assigned the duties of coroner. In one county those duties are assigned to the 911 coordinator/emergency manager, and in another it is a city police chief that has been given that responsibility. The remaining eleven (generally small) counties contract with a funeral director – often on a per case basis. One county (Nelson) reports that the funeral director volunteers to serve as coroner, but is contracted to transport bodies for autopsy if necessary.

We have contrasted the county information with census estimates and county data from the most recent State Forensic Examiner’s Report posted on the web.

While the small numbers make any analysis a bit suspect, based on population, the coroners with

Coroner	Population	Referrals		Consultations	
		Number	% of Pop.	Number	% of Pop.
Funeral Director (11)	52,649	48	0.09%	16	0.03%
Law Enforcement (15)	75,571	57	0.08%	54	0.07%
Medical (26) *	595,173	276	0.05%	125	0.02%

* Analysis excludes Grand Forks County

medical training (on average) appear to refer to, and consult with, the State Forensic Examiner less than non-medically trained coroners.

Counties collectively spent \$622,000 of property tax revenue in CY2013 for coroner services, and they have budgeted \$723,000 for CY2014. The detail of the financial information is contained in Table 2. This illustrates that statewide about 78% of county costs are related to coroner fees and about 18% is for body transport. The detail expenditure data shows that Grand Forks County is somewhat unique in that they fund autopsy costs as well.

It is our hope that this information is responsive to the Committee’s request.

County Expenditures and State Autopsies

Table 1

a.	2013 Estimated Population b.	County Coroner c.	Contract Coroner also in: d.	State Forensic Examiner's CY2012 Report by County	
				Referrals ¹ f.	Consultations ² g.
Adams	2,360	Medical Doctor		1	1
Barnes	11,190	Medical Doctor		8	6
Benson	6,877	Medical Doctor	Ramsey	3	1
Billings	874	Medical Doctor	Stark	2	
Bottineau	6,736	Funeral Director		2	2
Bowman	3,214	Funeral Director		2	2
Burke	2,306	Assigned-Sheriff		1	8
Burleigh	88,457	Medical Doctor	Morton	55	9
Cass	162,829	Medical Doctor ³		58	19
Cavalier	3,896	Medical Doctor		1	3
Dickey	5,248	Funeral Director		4	
Divide	2,314	Assigned-Sheriff		2	
Dunn	4,162	Registered Nurse		3	3
Eddy	2,404	Funeral Director		4	2
Emmons	3,486	Funeral Director		2	1
Foster	3,366	Medical Doctor		1	
Golden Valley	1,823	Funeral Director		3	
Grand Forks	69,179	Medical Doctor			
Grant	2,377	Medical Doctor		2	1
Griggs	2,296	Funeral Director			
Hettinger	2,660	Assigned-Sheriff		2	
Kidder	2,428	Police Chief		1	
LaMoure	4,166	Assigned-Sheriff		2	
Logan	1,946	Assigned-Sheriff			
McHenry	5,922	Medical Doctor	Wells	1	
McIntosh	2,754	Assigned-Sheriff		1	
McKenzie	9,314	Funeral Director		18	3
McLean	9,517	Funeral Director		9	5
Mercer	8,592	Medical Doctor	Oliver	4	1
Morton	28,990	Medical Doctor	Burleigh	11	2
Mountrail	9,376	Assigned-Sheriff		19	13
Nelson	3,095	Funeral Director		1	
Oliver	1,874	Medical Doctor	Mercer	1	1
Pembina	7,181	Medical Doctor		3	1
Pierce	4,451	Medical Doctor		2	7
Ramsey	11,554	Medical Doctor	Benson	13	2
Ransom	5,516	Funeral Director		3	1
Renville	2,608	Medical Doctor		1	
Richland	16,339	Assigned-Sheriff		4	4
Rolette	14,582	Assigned-Sheriff		12	15
Sargent	3,890	Registered Nurse		1	
Sheridan	1,304	Assigned-Sheriff		1	
Sioux	4,430	Assigned-Sheriff		8	
Slope	761	Assigned-Sheriff		2	
Stark	28,212	Medical Doctor	Billings	10	9
Steele	1,960	Assigned-EM/911		1	1
Stutsman	21,120	Medical Doctor		13	11
Towner	2,317	Registered Nurse		1	
Traill	8,245	Assigned-Sheriff		1	13
Walsh	11,104	Medical Doctor		2	2
Ward	67,990	UND Med.School		40	27
Wells	4,206	Medical Doctor	McHenry	1	1
Williams	29,595	Medical Doctor		38	18
				381	195

Notes: 1. **Referrals** consist of cases referred to the forensic examiner by county coroners for an examination or autopsy.
2. **Consultations** consist of discussing the circumstances surrounding a death with the county coroners and advising them about handling the case locally.
3. Cass County contracts with Fargo/Cass Public Health for the coroner, but also employs two coroner assistants

County Expenditures & Budgets for Coroner Services - Detail

Table 2

a.	CY2013 ¹ County Expenditures					CY2014 ¹ County Budgets				
	Coroner Salary Fringe/Operating/Travel/Rent/etc.	Body Transport Fees for Autopsy	Autopsy Fees if not performed by the State ME	Supplies Other costs if any	Total Coroner/ME Spending	Coroner Salary Fringe/Operating/Travel/Rent/etc.	Body Transport Fees for Autopsy	Autopsy Fees if not performed by the State ME	Supplies Other costs if any	Total Coroner/ME Spending
	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	h.	i.	j.	k.
Adams	\$ 743				\$ 743	\$ 2,500				\$ 2,500
Barnes	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000	\$ 2,700				\$ 2,700
Benson	\$ 200				\$ 200	\$ 200				\$ 200
Billings	\$ 500				\$ 500	\$ 500				\$ 500
Bottineau	\$ 2,500				\$ 2,500	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000
Bowman	\$ 3,000				\$ 3,000	\$ 3,000				\$ 3,000
Burke	\$ 720			\$ 507	\$ 1,227	\$ 720			\$ 750	\$ 1,470
Burleigh	\$ 54,750	\$ 13,801		\$ 1,085	\$ 69,636	\$ 54,750	\$ 15,000		\$ 3,500	\$ 73,250
Cass	\$ 111,700	\$ 15,000	\$ 2,000		\$ 128,700	\$ 169,856	\$ 20,000			\$ 189,856
Cavalier	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000
Dickey	\$ 800	\$ 4,100			\$ 4,900	\$ 800	\$ 4,100			\$ 4,900
Divide	\$ 1,090				\$ 1,090	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000
Dunn	\$ 3,086				\$ 3,086	\$ 3,600			\$ 2,500	\$ 6,100
Eddy	\$ 1,500				\$ 1,500	\$ 1,500				\$ 1,500
Emmons	\$ 1,500				\$ 1,500	\$ 1,500				\$ 1,500
Foster	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000
Golden Valley	\$ 6,100	\$ 1,000			\$ 7,100	\$ 5,713	\$ 1,650			\$ 7,363
Grand Forks	\$ 117,636	\$ 8,400	\$ 10,609		\$ 136,645	\$ 132,000	\$ 8,400	\$ 11,000		\$ 151,400
Grant					\$ -	\$ 75				\$ 75
Griggs	\$ 2,000			\$ 1,200	\$ 3,200	\$ 1,043				\$ 1,043
Hettinger	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000
Kidder	\$ 500				\$ 500	\$ 300				\$ 300
LaMoure	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000
Logan	\$ 250				\$ 250	\$ 250				\$ 250
McHenry	\$ 1,900	\$ 1,495		\$ 200	\$ 3,595	\$ 1,900	\$ 1,495		\$ 200	\$ 3,595
McIntosh	\$ 240	\$ 260			\$ 500	\$ 240	\$ 260			\$ 500
McKenzie	\$ 32,259			\$ 564	\$ 32,823	\$ 40,000			\$ 700	\$ 40,700
McLean		\$ 2,000		\$ 600	\$ 2,600		\$ 2,000		\$ 600	\$ 2,600
Mercer	\$ 2,500				\$ 2,500	\$ 2,500				\$ 2,500
Morton	\$ 27,400	\$ 7,100			\$ 34,500	\$ 27,400	\$ 5,200			\$ 32,600
Mountrail	\$ 4,848	\$ 5,391			\$ 10,239	\$ 4,848	\$ 5,152			\$ 10,000
Nelson					\$ -		\$ 500			\$ 500
Oliver	\$ 2,200				\$ 2,200	\$ 2,200				\$ 2,200
Pembina	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000
Pierce	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000
Ramsey		\$ 535			\$ 535		\$ 2,300			\$ 2,300
Ransom	\$ 300				\$ 300	\$ 200	\$ 240			\$ 440
Renville	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000				\$ 2,000
Richland				\$ 5,500	\$ 5,500				\$ 5,300	\$ 5,300
Rolette	\$ 1,200	\$ 3,800			\$ 5,000	\$ 1,200	\$ 3,800			\$ 5,000
Sargent	\$ 1,400	\$ 660			\$ 2,060	\$ 1,400	\$ 660			\$ 2,060
Sheridan	\$ 930				\$ 930	\$ 450				\$ 450
Sioux	\$ 500				\$ 500	\$ 500				\$ 500
Slope	\$ 500				\$ 500	\$ 500				\$ 500
Stark	\$ 10,000				\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000				\$ 10,000
Steele	\$ 2,520				\$ 2,520	\$ 2,640				\$ 2,640
Stutsman	\$ 20,000				\$ 20,000	\$ 20,000				\$ 20,000
Towner	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000				\$ 1,000
Trail	\$ 7,300				\$ 7,300	\$ 7,301				\$ 7,301
Walsh	\$ 800	\$ 1,440			\$ 2,240	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,500			\$ 2,500
Ward	\$ 30,000	\$ 35,000			\$ 65,000	\$ 30,000	\$ 35,000			\$ 65,000
Wells	\$ 3,496	\$ 1,000		\$ 2,000	\$ 6,496	\$ 3,496	\$ 1,000		\$ 2,000	\$ 6,496
Williams	\$ 13,158	\$ 12,126			\$ 25,284	\$ 17,550	\$ 16,620			\$ 34,170
Total	\$ 485,026	\$ 113,108	\$ 12,609	\$ 11,656	\$ 622,399	\$ 571,332	\$ 124,877	\$ 11,000	\$ 15,550	\$ 722,759
% of Total	77.9%	18.2%	2.0%	1.9%		79.0%	17.3%	1.5%	2.2%	

Notes: 1. Missing financial data estimated with amounts from neighboring counties of similar size and similar coroner arrangement - estimated data is italicized.