

February 3, 2016

Testimony on Senate Bill 531

Senator Rob Cowles

Thank you, Chairperson Vukmir and committee members for holding a hearing on Senate Bill 531. From changes in the 2015-17 biennial Budget, a county is now prohibited from charging a funeral home, cemetery, or crematorium more than a certain amount for specified fees from specified medical examiners or coroners. This change was intended as a protection for families and businesses that provide funeral or cremation services from increasing fees imposed on the services required for a deceased loved one.

This protection however, was intended to include fees rendered by both coroners and medical examiners, however the language passed in the budget only included fees from coroners. This bill is a technical fix to the budget bill and accomplishes the provision's original intent.

The bill and amendment further specifies that if a county that has been providing coroner or lay medical examiner services begins providing physician medical examiner services under an intergovernmental cooperation agreement, the board may increase only death certificate fees and cremation permits by \$100 each. This provision addresses counties that move toward a higher level of services, by moving from a coroner or lay medical to a licensed pathologist, covering multiple counties. Increasing those two fees would likely address the increased costs associated with moving to a much higher level of services without requiring the county to raise taxes.

This bill expands a moratorium on fee increases for certain fees charged by a county for coroner or medical examiner services so families will not be forced to pay increasing fees when a loved one passes



John Nygren

WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE ★ 89TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

**Senate Bill 531 Testimony
State Rep. John Nygren
February 3, 2016**

Thank you Chair Vukmir and members of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 531.

In the 2015-17 state budget bill, the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) voted to prohibit a county from charging a funeral home, cemetery, or crematorium more than a certain amount for specified fees. This change is an effective safeguard that protects businesses that provide funeral, cemetery, and cremation services from being subject to unreasonably high fees that may be imposed by the county. Originally, coroner and medical examiner services were intended to be included in this provision. This bill is a technical fix to the budget bill and accomplishes the provision's original intent.

Additionally, this bill specifies if a county that has been providing coroner or lay medical examiner services begins providing physician medical examiner services under an intergovernmental cooperation agreement, the board may establish a fee.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee today on this piece of legislation and welcome any questions you may have at this time.



WISCONSIN FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION
GUIDING YOU FORWARD

Date: February 3, 2016

To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee

From: Adam Raschka, Executive Director, WI Funeral Directors Association

Re: Support of Senate Bill 531

Chairperson Vukmir, members of the Health and Human Services Committee, thank for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 531. My name is Adam Raschka and I am the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Funeral Directors Association. WFDA Board President, Kevin Apfel of Edgerton is joining me today. WFDA represents 350 locally owned funeral homes in Wisconsin.

Senate Bill 531 closes a loophole created in the 2015-17 state budget which has been exploited by nearly one-third of Wisconsin counties to increase cremation permits and death certificate signing fees.

Wisconsin is an outlier in the Midwest when it comes to fees assessed upon grieving families. Current law requires a cremation permit be issued before anyone can be cremated in Wisconsin. This permit currently ranges in price from county to county between \$75 and \$350. By comparison, similar fees in Michigan range from \$0 to \$75. In Iowa the cremation permit fee is \$75 across the board and in Illinois the statewide fee is \$50. In Wisconsin, many counties go one step further and assess a "death certificate signing fee". In some counties it can cost up to \$250 for a coroner or medical examiner just to sign a death certificate.

The legislature took action in the budget to curb these fees by waiving the fees associated with low-income funerals. This practice, which was already successfully employed in Milwaukee, Racine and Marathon counties, was intended to be expanded statewide in the budget. In order to protect all families, a two-year freeze of fees for non-low income funerals was also adopted. This freeze is scheduled to sunset after two years and will allow for indexing of fees moving forward.

In the past these fees have grown dramatically. For example, in 2013 in Barron County a cremation permit cost \$100 and a death certificate signing fee was \$25. In just two years these fees increased to \$150 and \$125, a combined 120% increase. Barron County has gone even further since they discovered a loophole in the budget provision that has allowed counties with Medical Examiners to ignore the two-year freeze. A cremation permit today in Barron County now costs \$220 and \$150 for a death certificate signing fee for a combined total of \$370. This is a \$245 dollar increase in the Barron County death tax since 2013.

Since the budget passed, at least 25 counties have increased their fees. Eau Claire County has doubled their combined fees from \$250 to \$500. Juneau County has increased their cremation permit fee 150% to \$275. Rusk, Marathon, and Wood counties have implemented a new \$100 a death certificate fee. This is a death tax families were not paying one year ago. Twenty-one counties have yet to impose a death certificate signing fee.

Senate Bill 531 closes the loophole which exempts counties with a medical examiner from abiding from the fee freeze in the budget. In the end, it is grief-stricken families which pay these fees. The WFDA asks that you support this legislation which protects the families we serve.