

CHAPTER 979

INVESTIGATION OF DEATHS

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Cross-reference: See definitions in s. 967.02.

979.01 Reporting deaths required; penalty; taking specimens by coroner or medical examiner. (1) All physicians, authorities of hospitals, sanatoriums, public and private institutions, convalescent homes, authorities of any institution of a like nature, and other persons having knowledge of the death of any person who has died under any of the following circumstances, shall immediately report the death to the sheriff, police chief, or medical examiner or coroner of the county where the death took place:

- (a) All deaths in which there are unexplained, unusual or suspicious circumstances.
- (b) All homicides.
- (c) All suicides.
- (d) All deaths following an abortion.
- (e) All deaths due to poisoning, whether homicidal, suicidal or accidental.
- (f) All deaths following accidents, whether the injury is or is not the primary cause of death.
- (g) When there was no physician, or accredited practitioner of a bona fide religious denomination relying upon prayer or spiritual means for healing in attendance within 30 days preceding death.

(h) When a physician refuses to sign the death record.

(i) When, after reasonable efforts, a physician cannot be obtained to sign the medical certification as required under s. 69.18 (2) (b) or (c) within 6 days after the pronouncement of death or sooner under circumstances which the coroner or medical examiner determines to be an emergency.

(1g) A sheriff or police chief shall, immediately upon notification under sub. (1) or s. 948.23 (1) (b) of a death, notify the coroner or the medical examiner, and the coroner or medical examiner of the county where death took place, if the crime, injury, or event occurred in another county, shall immediately report the death to the coroner or medical examiner of that county.

(1m) The coroner or medical examiner receiving notification under sub. (1) or (1g) shall immediately notify the district attorney.

(1r) If the coroner or medical examiner is notified of a death under sub. (1) or (1g) and determines that his or her notification of the death was not required under sub. (1) or (1g), he or she shall notify the director of the historical society under s. 157.70 (3).

(2) Unless s. 948.23 (1) (b) applies, any person who violates this section shall be fined not more than \$1,000 or imprisoned not more than 90 days.

(3) In all cases of death reportable under sub. (1) or s. 948.23 (1) (b) where an autopsy is not performed, the coroner or medical examiner may take for analysis any and all specimens, body fluids and any other material which will assist him or her in determining the cause of death. The specimens, body fluids and other material taken under this subsection shall not be admissible in evidence in

any civil action against the deceased or the deceased's estate, as the result of any act of the deceased.

(3m) In all cases of death reportable under sub. (1) or s. 948.23 (1) (b) where an autopsy is not performed, the coroner or medical examiner shall take for analysis any and all specimens, body fluids and any other material that will assist him or her in determining the cause of death if requested to do so by a spouse, parent, child or sibling of the deceased person and not objected to by any of those family members. The specimens, body fluids and other material taken under this subsection shall not be admissible in evidence in any civil action against the deceased or his or her estate, as the result of any act of the deceased.

(4) No person may embalm or perform an autopsy on the body of any person who has died under any of the circumstances listed in this section or on the body of any person whose death has been reported under s. 948.23 (1) (b) unless the person obtains the written authorization of the coroner of the county in which the injury or cause of death occurred. Such authorization shall be issued by the coroner or a deputy within 12 hours after notification of the reportable death, or as soon thereafter as possible in the event of unexplained, unusual or suspicious circumstances.

(5) If a person specified to report under sub. (1) has knowledge of the death of any individual occurring within 24 hours after that individual either has presented at or is admitted to a hospital or other facility described under sub. (1), whichever is earlier, the person specified to report under sub. (1) shall immediately notify the medical examiner or coroner of the county where the death took place to allow the medical examiner or coroner to determine if the death is reportable under sub. (1). This subsection does not apply to a hospice, as defined in s. 50.90 (1).

History: 1973 c. 272; 1975 c. 294, 421; 1979 c. 221; 1983 a. 279 ss. 8, 22; Stats. 1983 s. 979.01; 1985 a. 315, 316; 1989 a. 121; 1993 a. 486; 1999 a. 85; 2001 a. 38; 2011 a. 268; 2017 a. 334; 2023 a. 175.

Cross-reference: See also s. DHS 135.09, Wis. adm. code.

Admission of a blood sample is not barred by sub. (3) when the action is brought by the deceased's estate. *Luedtke v. Shedivy*, 51 Wis. 2d 110, 186 N.W.2d 220 (1971).

If an accident occurs in one county and the victim is transported to another county, and death occurs there, the coroner where the death occurs has a duty to immediately report the death to the coroner of county where the crime, injury, or event occurred, and the coroner of the latter county has authority to investigate and a duty to hold an inquest if he or she considers it necessary or if directed by the district attorney of his or her county. 62 Atty. Gen. 127.

979.012 Reporting deaths of public health concern.

(1) If a coroner or medical examiner is aware of the death of a person who, at the time of his or her death, had an illness or a health condition that satisfies s. 323.02 (16) (a) or if the coroner or medical examiner knows or suspects that the person had a communicable disease that, under rules promulgated by the department of health services, must be reported to a local health officer or to the state epidemiologist, the coroner or medical examiner shall report the illness, health condition, or communicable disease to the department of health services and to the local health department, as defined in s. 250.01 (4), in whose jurisdiction the coroner or medical examiner is located in writing or by electronic transmission within 24 hours of learning of the deceased's illness, health condition, or communicable disease.

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(2) In a report under sub. (1), the coroner or medical examiner shall include all of the following information if such information is available:

(a) The illness, health condition, or communicable disease of the deceased.

(b) The name, date of birth, gender, race, occupation, and home and work addresses of the deceased.

(c) The name and address of the coroner or medical examiner.

(d) If the illness, health condition, or communicable disease was related to an animal or insect bite, the suspected location where the bite occurred and the name and address of the owner of the animal or insect, if an owner is identified.

History: 2001 a. 109; 2005 a. 198; 2007 a. 20 s. 9121 (6) (a); 2009 a. 42.

979.015 Subpoena for documents. Upon the request of the coroner, medical examiner or district attorney, a court shall issue a subpoena requiring the production of documents necessary for the determination of a decedent's cause of death. The documents may include the decedent's patient health care records and treatment records, as defined in ss. 51.30 and 146.81 (4). The documents shall be returnable to the officer named in the subpoena.

History: 1983 a. 279.

979.02 Autopsies. The coroner, medical examiner or district attorney may order the conducting of an autopsy upon the body of a dead person any place within the state in cases where an inquest might be had as provided in s. 979.04 notwithstanding the fact that no such inquest is ordered or conducted. The autopsy shall be conducted by a licensed physician who has specialized training in pathology. The district attorney may move the circuit court for the county in which the body is buried for an order disinterring the body for purposes of autopsy. The order shall be granted by the circuit court upon a reasonable showing that any of the criteria specified in s. 979.04 exists. This section does not prevent additional autopsies or examinations of the body if there are unanswered pathological questions concerning the death and the causes of death.

History: 1983 a. 279 s. 12; Stats. 1983 s. 979.02.

979.025 Autopsy of correctional inmate. (1) INMATE CONFINED TO AN INSTITUTION IN THIS STATE. If an individual dies while he or she is in the legal custody of the department and confined to a correctional facility located in this state, the coroner or medical examiner of the county where the death occurred shall perform an autopsy on the deceased individual. If the coroner or medical examiner who performs the autopsy determines that the individual's death may have been the result of any of the situations that would permit the district attorney to order an inquest under s. 979.04 (1), the coroner or medical examiner shall follow the procedures under s. 979.04 (2).

(2) INMATE CONFINED IN AN INSTITUTION IN ANOTHER STATE. If an individual dies while he or she is in the legal custody of the department and confined to a correctional facility in another state under a contract under s. 301.07, 301.21, or 302.25, the department shall have an autopsy performed by an appropriate authority in the other state or by the coroner or medical examiner of the county in which the circuit court is located that sentenced the individual to the custody of the department. If the coroner or medical examiner who performs the autopsy in this state determines that the individual's death may have been the result of any of the situations that would permit the district attorney to order an inquest under s. 979.04 (1), the coroner or medical examiner shall forward the results of the autopsy to the appropriate authority in the other state.

(3) COSTS OF AN AUTOPSY. The costs of an autopsy performed under sub. (1) or (2) shall be paid by the department.

History: 2001 a. 16.

979.03 Autopsy for sudden infant death syndrome. If a child under the age of 2 years dies suddenly and unexpectedly under circumstances indicating that the death may have been

caused by sudden infant death syndrome, the coroner or medical examiner shall notify the child's parents or guardian that an autopsy will be performed, at no cost to the parents or guardian, unless the parents or guardian object to the autopsy. The coroner or medical examiner shall conduct or shall order the conducting of an autopsy at county expense, unless parent or guardian requests in writing that an autopsy not be performed. If the autopsy reveals that sudden infant death syndrome is the cause of death, that fact shall be so stated in the autopsy report. The parents or guardian of the child shall be promptly notified of the cause of death and of the availability of counseling services.

History: 1977 c. 246; 1983 a. 279 s. 13; Stats. 1983 s. 979.03.

Only when a coroner has no reason to believe that a death was caused by circumstances under s. 979.01 [now s. 979.04] other than sudden infant death syndrome does a written objection under s. 979.125 [now s. 979.03] bar an autopsy under s. 979.121 [now s. 979.02]. 68 Atty. Gen. 55.

979.04 Inquests: when called. (1) If the district attorney has notice of the death of any person and there is reason to believe from the circumstances surrounding the death that felony murder, first-degree or 2nd-degree intentional homicide, first-degree or 2nd-degree reckless homicide, homicide by negligent handling of dangerous weapon, explosives or fire, homicide by negligent operation of vehicle, homicide resulting from negligent control of a vicious animal or homicide by intoxicated user of a vehicle or firearm may have been committed, or that death may have been due to suicide or unexplained or suspicious circumstances, the district attorney may order that an inquest be conducted for the purpose of inquiring how the person died. The district attorney shall appear in any such inquest representing the state in presenting all evidence which may be relevant or material to the inquiry of the inquest. The inquest may be held in any county in this state in which venue would lie for the trial of any offense charged as the result of or involving the death. An inquest may only be ordered by the district attorney under this subsection or by the circuit judge under sub. (2).

(2) If the coroner or medical examiner has knowledge of the death of any person in the manner described under sub. (1), he or she shall immediately notify the district attorney. The notification shall include information concerning the circumstances surrounding the death. The coroner or medical examiner may request the district attorney to order an inquest under sub. (1). If the district attorney refuses to order the inquest, a coroner or medical examiner may petition the circuit court to order an inquest. The court may issue the order if it finds that the district attorney has abused his or her discretion in not ordering an inquest.

(3) Subsequent to receipt of notice of the death, the district attorney may request the coroner or medical examiner to conduct a preliminary investigation and report back to the district attorney. The district attorney may determine the scope of the preliminary investigation. This subsection does not limit or prevent any other investigation into the death by any law enforcement agency with jurisdiction over the investigation.

History: 1983 a. 279; 1985 a. 135; 1987 a. 399.

979.05 Inquests: procedure. (1) An inquest shall be conducted by a circuit judge or a circuit court commissioner.

(2) The inquest shall be conducted before a jury unless the district attorney, coroner, or medical examiner requests that the inquest be conducted before the judge or circuit court commissioner only. If the inquest is to be conducted before a jury, a sufficient number of names of prospective jurors shall be selected from the prospective juror list for the county in which the inquest is to be held by the clerk of circuit court in the manner provided in s. 756.06. The judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest shall summon the prospective jurors to appear before the judge or circuit court commissioner at the time fixed in the summons. The summons may be served by mail, or by personal service if the judge, circuit court commissioner, or district attorney determines personal service to be appropriate. The summons shall be in the form used to summon petit jurors in the circuit courts of the county. Any person who fails to appear when sum-

moned as an inquest juror is subject to a forfeiture of not more than \$40. The inquest jury shall consist of 6 jurors. If 6 jurors do not remain from the number originally summoned after establishment of qualifications, the judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest may require the clerk of the circuit court to select sufficient additional jurors' names. Those persons shall be summoned forthwith by the sheriff of the county.

(3) The judge or circuit court commissioner shall examine on oath or affirmation each person who is called as a juror to discover whether the juror is related by blood, marriage or adoption to the decedent, any member of the decedent's family, the district attorney, any other attorney appearing in the case or any members of the office of the district attorney or of the office of any other attorney appearing in the case, has expressed or formed any opinion regarding the matters being inquired into in the inquest or is aware of or has any bias or prejudice concerning the matters being inquired into in the inquest. If any prospective juror is found to be not indifferent or is found to have formed an opinion which cannot be laid aside, that juror shall be excused. The judge or circuit commissioner may select one or more alternate jurors if the inquest is likely to be protracted. This subsection does not limit the right of the district attorney to supplement the judge's or circuit commissioner's examination of any prospective jurors as to qualifications.

(4) When 6 jurors have been selected, the judge or circuit court commissioner shall administer to them an oath or affirmation which shall be substantially in the following form:

You do solemnly swear (affirm) that you will diligently inquire and determine on behalf of this state when, and in what manner and by what means, the person known as who is now dead came to his or her death and that you will return a true verdict thereon according to your knowledge, according to the evidence presented and according to the instructions given to you by the (judge) (circuit court commissioner).

(5) Prior to the submission of evidence to the jury, the judge or circuit court commissioner may instruct the jury on its duties and on the substantive law regarding the issues which may be inquired into before the jury. The district attorney may, at any time during the course of the inquest, make statements to the jury relating to procedural or evidentiary matters he or she and the judge or circuit court commissioner deem appropriate. Section 972.12 applies to the conduct of the inquest jury.

(6) The judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest may order that proceedings be secret if the district attorney so requests or concurs.

(7) Inquest jurors shall receive the same compensation as jurors under s. 756.25.

History: 1983 a. 279; Sup. Ct. Order No. 96–08, 207 Wis. 2d xv (1997); 1999 a. 162; 2001 a. 61.

979.06 Inquests: witnesses. (1) The judge or circuit court commissioner may issue subpoenas for witnesses at the request of the coroner or medical examiner and shall issue subpoenas for witnesses requested by the district attorney. Subpoenas are returnable at the time and place stated therein. Persons who are served with a subpoena may be compelled to attend proceedings in the manner provided in s. 885.12.

(2) The judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest and the district attorney may require by subpoena the attendance of one or more expert witnesses, including physicians, surgeons and pathologists, for the purposes of conducting an examination of the body and all relevant and material scientific and medical tests connected with the examination and testifying as to the results of the examination and tests. The expert witnesses so subpoenaed shall receive reasonable fees determined by the district attorney and the judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest.

(3) Any witness examined at an inquest may have counsel present during the examination of that witness. The counsel may

not examine or cross-examine his or her client, cross-examine or call other witnesses or argue before the judge or circuit court commissioner holding the inquest.

(4) The judge or circuit court commissioner shall administer an oath or affirmation to each witness which shall be substantially in the following form:

You do solemnly swear (affirm) that the evidence and testimony you give to this inquest concerning the death of the person known as shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

(5) The judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest shall cause the testimony given by all witnesses to be reduced to writing or recorded and may employ stenographers to take and transcribe all of the testimony. The stenographer shall receive reimbursement at a reasonable rate for each appearance and transcription at rates in accordance with the customary charges in the area for similar services.

(6) Inquest witnesses shall receive the same compensation as witnesses in circuit court under s. 814.67.

History: 1983 a. 279; 2001 a. 61.

979.07 Incriminating testimony compelled; immunity.

(1) (a) If a person refuses to testify or to produce books, papers or documents when required to do so before an inquest for the reason that the testimony or evidence required of the person may tend to incriminate him or her or subject him or her to a forfeiture or penalty, the person may be compelled to testify or produce the evidence by order of the circuit court of the county in which the inquest is convened on motion of the district attorney. A person who testifies or produces evidence in obedience to the command of the court in that case is not subject to any forfeiture or penalty for or on account of testifying or producing evidence, except the person is subject to prosecution and punishment for perjury or false swearing committed in so testifying.

(b) The immunity provided under par. (a) is subject to the restrictions under s. 972.085.

(2) If a witness appearing before an inquest fails or refuses without just cause to comply with an order of the court under this section to give testimony in response to a question or with respect to any matter, the court, upon the failure or refusal or when the failure or refusal is duly brought to its attention, may punish the witness for contempt under ch. 785.

History: 1983 a. 279; 1989 a. 122.

979.08 Inquests: instructions, burden of proof and verdict.

(1) When the evidence is concluded and the testimony closed, the judge or circuit court commissioner shall instruct the jury on its duties and on the substantive law regarding the issues inquired into before the jury. The district attorney shall prepare a written set of appropriate requested instructions and shall submit them to the judge or circuit court commissioner who, together with the district attorney, shall compile the final set of instructions which shall be given. The instructions shall include those criminal offenses for which the judge or circuit court commissioner believes a reasonable jury might return a verdict based upon a finding of probable cause.

(2) The jury's verdict shall be based upon a finding of probable cause and shall be unanimous.

(3) The jury shall retire to consider its verdict after hearing all of the testimony and evidence, making all necessary inquiries and having been instructed in the law. The judge or circuit court commissioner shall provide the jury with one complete set of written instructions providing the substantive law to be applied to the issues to be decided. The verdict shall be in a form which permits the following findings:

(a) Whether the deceased came to his or her death by criminal means and, if so, the specific crimes committed and the name of the person or persons, if known, having committed the crimes.

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(b) Whether the deceased came to his or her death by natural causes, accident, suicide or an act privileged by law.

(4) The jury shall render its verdict in writing, signed by all of its members. The verdict shall set forth its findings from the evidence produced according to the instructions.

(5) The verdict delivered by the inquest jury is advisory and does not preclude or require the issuance of any criminal charges by the district attorney.

(6) Any verdict so rendered, after being validated and signed by the judge or circuit court commissioner, together with the record of the inquest, shall be delivered to the district attorney for consideration. After considering the verdict and record, the district attorney may deliver the entire inquest record or any part thereof to the coroner or medical examiner for safekeeping.

(7) The record of a secret inquest proceeding shall not be open for inspection unless so ordered by the judge or circuit court commissioner conducting the inquest upon petition by the district attorney.

History: 1983 a. 279; 2001 a. 61.

979.09 Burial of body. If any judge or circuit court commissioner conducts an inquest as to the death of a stranger or of a person whose identity is unknown or whose body is unclaimed or if the district attorney determines that no inquest into the death of such a person is necessary and the circuit judge has not ordered an inquest under s. 979.04 (2), the coroner or medical examiner shall cause the body to be decently buried or cremated and shall certify to all the charges incurred in taking any inquest by him or her and to the expenses of burial or cremation of the dead body. The charges and expenses shall be audited by the county board of the proper county and paid out of the county treasury.

History: 1983 a. 279 s. 14; Stats. 1983 s. 979.09; 2001 a. 61.

979.10 Cremation. (1) (a) No person may cremate the corpse of a deceased person within 48 hours after the death, or the discovery of the death, of the deceased person unless the death was caused by a contagious or infectious disease. Notwithstanding s. 979.09, no person may cremate an unclaimed corpse if the deceased person died as the result of homicide. No person may cremate a corpse unless the person has received a cremation permit from:

1. The coroner or medical examiner in the county where the death occurred if the death occurred in this state;

2. The coroner or medical examiner in the county where the event which caused the death occurred if the death occurred in this state and if the death is the subject of an investigation under s. 979.01; or

3. The coroner or medical examiner of the county where the corpse is to be cremated if the death occurred outside this state. A cremation permit issued under this subdivision may not be used in any county except the county in which the cremation permit is issued.

(ae) The department of health services shall design a cremation permit application form for a person to use when applying for a cremation permit under par. (a). The department shall include in the form a place for a coroner or medical examiner to state that he or she has viewed the corpse that is the subject of the permit and made personal inquiry into the cause and manner of death under sub. (2) and is of the opinion that no further examination or judicial inquiry is necessary.

NOTE: Par. (ae) is created by 2023 Wis. Act 84 eff. on the date specified in the Department of Health Services notice published in the Wisconsin Administrative Register under 2023 Wis. Act 84, section 5 (1).

(am) If the coroner or medical examiner of a county requires applicants for cremation permits to use an application form to apply for a cremation permit, a person who applies for a cremation permit in that county shall use the cremation permit application form designed under par. (ae) to apply for the cremation permit.

NOTE: Par. (am) is created by 2023 Wis. Act 84 eff. on the date specified in the Department of Health Services notice published in the Wisconsin Administrative Register under 2023 Wis. Act 84, section 5 (1).

(as) Once completed by a coroner or medical examiner, the cremation permit application form designed under par. (ae) may constitute a cremation permit issued under par. (a) if authorized by the coroner or medical examiner of the county in which the cremation permit is issued.

NOTE: Par. (as) is created by 2023 Wis. Act 84 eff. on the date specified in the Department of Health Services notice published in the Wisconsin Administrative Register under 2023 Wis. Act 84, section 5 (1).

(b) A coroner or medical examiner shall include in any cremation permit issued under par. (a) a statement that he or she has viewed the corpse that is the subject of the permit and made personal inquiry into the cause and manner of death under sub. (2) and is of the opinion that no further examination or judicial inquiry is necessary. Unless further examination or judicial inquiry is necessary, a coroner or medical examiner shall issue a cremation permit under par. (a) within 24 hours of viewing the corpse or submission of the medical certification under s. 69.18 (2), whichever is later.

(2) If a corpse is to be cremated, the coroner or medical examiner shall make a careful personal inquiry into the cause and manner of death, and conduct an autopsy or order the conducting of an autopsy, if in his or her or the district attorney's opinion it is necessary to determine the cause and manner of death. If the coroner or medical examiner determines that no further examination or judicial inquiry is necessary he or she shall certify that fact. Upon written request by the district attorney the coroner or medical examiner shall obtain the concurrence of the district attorney before issuing the certification. If the coroner or medical examiner determines that further examination or judicial inquiry is necessary, he or she shall notify the district attorney under s. 979.04 (2).

(3) The coroner shall receive a fee of \$25, to be paid out of the county treasury, for each corpse viewed or inquiry made under sub. (2), unless an annual salary has been established by the county board under s. 979.11.

(4) Whoever accepts, receives, or takes any corpse of a deceased person with intent to destroy the corpse by means of cremation, or who cremates or aids and assists in the cremation of any corpse of a deceased person without having presented the permit specified in sub. (1) shall be fined not more than \$10,000 or imprisoned not more than 9 months or both.

History: 1971 c. 164 s. 86; 1973 c. 272; 1979 c. 177; 1983 a. 146; 1983 a. 279 s. 20; Stats. 1983 s. 979.10; 1985 a. 315; 2001 a. 104; 2015 a. 237; 2017 a. 246; 2023 a. 84.

Cross-reference: See also s. DHS 135.06, Wis. adm. code.

Chapters 69 and 157 are not alternatives to the requirement in this section that anyone cremating a corpse first obtain a cremation permit from the coroner. University medical schools or anyone else qualified to receive a corpse can receive a corpse for research without first obtaining a permit. This section only requires that a permit be obtained before cremation. 77 Atty. Gen. 218.

979.11 Compensation of officers. The sole compensation of the coroner and deputy coroners for attendance at an inquest and for any preliminary investigation under this chapter at the direction of the district attorney shall be a reasonable sum set by the county board for each day actually and necessarily required for the purpose, and a sum set by the county board for each mile actually and necessarily traveled in performing the duty. Any coroner or deputy coroner may be paid an annual salary and allowance for traveling expenses to be established by the county board under s. 59.22 which shall be in lieu of all fees, per diem and compensation for services rendered.

History: 1975 c. 294; 1977 c. 187 s. 135; 1977 c. 449 s. 497; 1983 a. 279 s. 15; Stats. 1983 s. 979.11; 1995 a. 201.

979.12 Fees for morgue services. A county board may establish a fee for the retention of a body at the morgue after the first day, not to exceed an amount reasonably related to the actual and necessary cost of retaining the body. This charge shall not apply to indigents.

History: 1983 a. 146; 1983 a. 279 s. 23; Stats. 1983 s. 979.12.

979.22 Autopsies and toxicological services by medical examiners. A medical examiner may perform autopsies and

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toxicological services not required under this chapter and may charge a fee established by the county board for such autopsies and services. The fee may not exceed an amount reasonably related to the actual and necessary cost of providing the service.

History: 1983 a. 146; 1985 a. 93; 1987 a. 403 s. 256; 1989 a. 298.