



**JOAN BALLWEG**

STATE SENATOR • 14<sup>TH</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

**Senate Bills 173, 174, 175, 176, 177 and 178  
Recommendations of the  
2022 Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards**

**Testimony of Senator Joan Ballweg  
Senate Committee on Health  
September 20, 2023**

Good morning, Chair Cabral-Guevara, and members of the committee. Thank you for hearing this package of bills, which were recommended unanimously after months of study and discussion by the 2022 Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards.

I had the pleasure to serve as chairperson of the committee, which was comprised of two senators, two representatives, and seven public members. The public members ranged in expertise, including two medical examiners, a public health nurse, a funeral director, and various mental health and research advocates.

The idea for the Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards came after I served as Chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention in the 2019 legislative session.

The committee was tasked with analyzing ways to improve our data on deaths, with the idea that better data will better inform death prevention efforts, particularly in the context of suicide. To that end, the committee heard testimony about, and had in-depth discussions on, the need for more uniform information included in death records. Death record data relies heavily on the work of various actors, including funeral directors, physicians, and county medical examiners/coroners.

In addition, the committee heard testimony about efforts to gather death-related information using other tools beyond death records. For example, standardized suicide investigation forms and fatality review teams are ways that some public health and other professionals are gathering comprehensive data on certain kinds of deaths. The goal of these tools is to assist stakeholders in identifying risk factors that can better inform preventative efforts.

In the interest of time, I will not describe in detail each of the six bills being heard today, but rather explain the three specific themes under which the bills may be categorized, which were the product of robust discussion and consensus.

First, the committee devoted significant discussion to the value of fatality review teams. Many counties currently have review teams of various types, but no state law governs their use. These teams discuss individual deaths, in a confidential setting, with the goal of identifying risk factors and circumstances that surround the



death, so as to inform future prevention strategies. Recognizing the value of these teams, Senate Bill 177 codifies the existence of these teams in order to legitimize their practice, specify the confidential nature of their meetings, and clarify a team's ability to access certain records.

In addition, three of the bills address the content of a death record and the process for creating a death record by:

- Allowing inclusion of up to two additional occupation entries to the death record to provide better data about decedents with multiple occupations (Senate Bill 173).
- Requiring individuals to certify the cause and manner of death using an existing DHS electronic system to ensure timeliness, accuracy, and uniformity (Senate Bill 174).
- Ensuring that medical examiners and coroners receive notice of certain deaths in order to determine whether to take jurisdiction, so as to assist in timely submission of certain death record data (Senate Bill 178).

Finally, two bills seek to create more uniformity among medical certifications of cause and manner of death by:

- Requiring DHS to establish and encourage best practices for coroners and medical examiners when completing medical certifications and death investigations (Senate Bill 176).
- Requiring DHS to promote and encourage appropriate training for any person who is authorized to complete and sign a medical certification (Senate Bill 175).

I have been working with stakeholders to draft amendments to a few of these bills. The Department of Health Services has requested an amendment to Senate Bill 177 which will add maternal death to the list of reviewable deaths. I have also drafted an amendment for Senate Bill 178 which will eliminate deaths that occur within 24 hours of a patient being placed in hospice care from the deaths that necessary to report to the Coroner or Medical Examiner.

Again, I appreciate the opportunities both to have chaired this study committee and to testify before you on these six bills. Legislative Council attorneys Amber Otis and Kelly McGraw are with me today to assist in answering any questions.



September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Members of the Senate Committee on Health

**Testimony on 2023 Senate Bills 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, & 178**

*Relating to bills suggested by the Legislative Council Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting*

Thank you, Chairwoman Cabral-Guevara and other members of the committee, for hearing these bills today. The proposals before you came from the Legislative Council Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards, for which I was honored to serve as the Vice-Chair. Our task was to review the current protocols for investigating causes of death, reporting deaths, and the uniformity of those practices across the state. As tragic as death can be, it can also be incredibly informative when it comes to identifying trends and potential short comings in our system and society. Improving the reporting requirements and processes for all types of death, but especially unexpected ones, can help strengthen the validity of this data.

Throughout the study committee meetings, we got to hear from multiple people across different professions that are involved in not only certifying a death, but reporting the necessary information to the Wisconsin Vital Records Office. Their presentations and testimonies shined a light on areas of the process that need improvement. The bills before you can be broken down into three major categories for the death reporting process: creating a death record, certification uniformity, and additional data sources regarding death.

Senate Bill 173, 174, and 178 pertain to the creation of the death record. If one of the goals of this committee was to help identify trends and strengthen statistics, SB 173 helps with painting a better picture of the life of the recently deceased. It allows for adding more than one occupation for the individual, which can provide insight to different environmental factors that could have influenced health and wellbeing. SB 174 would aim to alleviate potential human error when filling out the death record by requiring the individuals signing the medical certification to use the electronic vital records system. Electronically entering this data would minimize the misinterpretations of what was written and then faxed, helping ensure the information used for the death record is accurate. Lastly, SB 178 puts a 24 hour timeline on when a hospital or similar institution needs to contact a medical examiner or coroner about a death in the facility to see if investigation is needed.

SB 175 and 176 recommend creating best practices and training for completing medical certifications, completing death investigations and filling out death reports. We heard throughout our meetings the importance of filling out a death record properly and how it seems that there is a disconnect with the medical world and the world of medical examiners and coroners. Establishing best practices would be a step towards uniformity across our 72 counties.

Lastly, SB 177 would officially recognize fatality review teams under state law. Currently, 45 counties in Wisconsin have created their own fatality review teams to help gather data and information on

STATE SENATOR

JESSE



JAMES

23<sup>RD</sup> DISTRICT

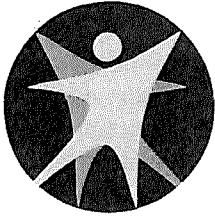
overdose deaths, child deaths, suicide deaths, as well as others. This bill helps implement parameters and scopes for these review teams, as well as protect the sensitive, confidential data they deal with.

Death can be a heavy subject, and collecting this information can be sensitive and difficult. We need to help those who are obtaining this data by making sure the system they are using is functioning properly and efficiently, which will then help with identifying overall issues and trends. Creating a uniform standard for this industry can change what type of data can be collected, what we can learn from it, and most importantly, how we can change it for the better. Thank you, and I will happily take any questions at this time.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James  
23<sup>rd</sup> Senate District  
[Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov)



State of Wisconsin  
Department of Health Services

Tony Evers, Governor  
Kirsten L. Johnson, Secretary

**TO:** Members of the Senate Committee on Health

**FROM:** HJ Waukau, Legislative Director

**DATE:** September 20, 2023

**RE:** Legislative Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards Bills

The Department of Health Services (DHS) would like to submit testimony for information only on the bills put forward by the Legislative Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards (UDRS). DHS appreciates its collaboration with the UDRS Committee and the opportunity to provide feedback on all of the bills as they were being drafted and deliberated. Additionally, DHS would like to thank the UDRS Committee members for accepting a significant amount of DHS' feedback and for putting forward a package of bills that will help to update the death reporting and vital records processes. Six bills in all were drafted by the UDRS Committee with five directly impacting DHS operations and the Statewide Vital Records Information System (SVRIS). DHS takes no issue with SB 173, SB 175, or SB 176 as currently drafted; and SB 178 does not impact DHS operations. However, DHS recommends that SB 174 and SB 177 be amended to provide resources for DHS to carry out the tasks enumerated under both bills and to allow for a more efficient use of resources.

DHS testified twice in front of the UDRS Committee during its deliberations over the latter half of 2022. DHS' first testimony focused on delivering an overview to the Committee on the functions of the State Vital Records Office (SVRO), what constitutes a vital record, and the death records process.<sup>1</sup> This overview was provided at the request of the Committee Chairs and was intended to provide a foundation for all Committee members for their subsequent deliberations. In its second hearing, also at the request of the Committee, DHS presented on the state's interactions with the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) and State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS); which are used to track violence-related and overdose deaths.<sup>2</sup>

SB 174 as drafted would require any person who completes and signs a medical certification to use the electronic system of vital records to complete the certification as required under law while eliminating the option to mail a death record to the filing party. Under SB 174 certifiers filing death records would no longer be allowed to use a "fax attestation form" as is allowed under existing law. Nationwide, 21 jurisdictions have some sort of requirement for electronic medical certification. Moving to an electronic records transfer system would require significant system upgrades and staff support to prepare for the additional users. Currently, all Wisconsin funeral homes, coroners, and medical examiners use the electronic system to file death records, while a majority of physician-submitted records are done via the fax attestation process.

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<sup>1</sup>2022 Legislative Council Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards, "Presentation by Lynette Childs, State Registrar, State Vital Records Office, and HJ Waukau, Legislative Director, Department of Health Services," Wisconsin State Legislature, July 18, 2022, [https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2022/2407/010\\_july\\_18\\_2022\\_10\\_00\\_a\\_m\\_room\\_411\\_south\\_state\\_capitol/july18\\_dhs\\_presentation](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2022/2407/010_july_18_2022_10_00_a_m_room_411_south_state_capitol/july18_dhs_presentation).

<sup>2</sup>2022 Legislative Council Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards, "Presentation, National Violent Death Reporting system (NVDRS), by Lindsay Emer, PhD, NVDRS Coordinator, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (October 17, 2022)," Wisconsin State Legislature, October 17, 2022, [https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2022/2407/030\\_october\\_17\\_2022\\_10\\_00\\_a\\_m\\_room\\_411\\_south\\_state\\_capitol/oct17presentation\\_dhs\\_1](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2022/2407/030_october_17_2022_10_00_a_m_room_411_south_state_capitol/oct17presentation_dhs_1).

In 2022, 8.8 percent of all medical certifications performed by physicians in Wisconsin were filed electronically using SVRIS. Utilizing the number of unique physicians that signed death certificates last year as a baseline, it is estimated that SB 174 would result in a net increase of over 5,000 new SVRIS users, equating to a 142 percent increase over the current user base. To account for this increase DHS would need 4.0 new full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, under the Information System Business Automation—Senior classification, at a cost of \$338,188 in program revenue annually to implement the requirements of SB 174. Two positions would be required to serve as system trainers for new users, maintain and perform ongoing training refreshers for established users, maintain end user documentation, and develop and maintain end user policy support. The other two FTEs would extend the capacity of existing analysts to meet the needs of the additional system users expected under this bill. Currently the SVRO has 5.0 FTEs to support existing program demands. States like South Carolina, Iowa, and Minnesota have similar programs as would be created under SB 174 and have supporting staffs of 8-to-10 FTEs. Funding to cover the increased staffing and costs would be covered by program revenue from fees appropriated under Wis. Stat. § 20.435(1)(gm) and assessed by SVRO. No new GPR funding would be needed.

SB 177 creates a new structure for fatality review teams in Wisconsin. Currently, fatality review teams operate in an ad hoc manner and there is no specific statutory authority related to fatality review teams. Rather there are only general provisions around confidentiality of records, access to records, and surveillance of public concerns. SB 177 would formalize this process by requiring DHS to establish a statewide fatality review program and permit DHS to create a statewide fatality review team. SB 177 would also define the duties, obligations, and structures of fatality review teams; the types of deaths to be reviewed; potential team members; and confer rulemaking authority on DHS for the development of the fatality review program. To help implement the provisions of SB 177, 4.0 new FTEs at a cost of \$317,223 GPR annually will be needed to satisfy the new programming requirements created by the bill. The four positions recommended by DHS would be as follows:

- *Human Services Program Coordinator*: who would be responsible for the overall coordination and oversight of the program, including supporting existing teams and providing support for new teams.
- *Program and Policy Analyst*: who would be responsible for supporting state and local teams and would lead dissemination of data and reports to stakeholders outlined in the proposal.
- *Public Health Educator*: who would support the Human Services Program Coordinator and Program and Policy Analyst in information dissemination and using findings from review teams to implement new best practices.
- *Epidemiologist Advanced*: who would support data needs of local teams, perform quantitative and qualitative analysis, and synthesize technical data for lay use.

Additionally, DHS recommends that maternal deaths also be added to the list of eligible deaths that could be investigated by the proposed Fatality Review Team program under SB 174. DHS currently reviews maternal deaths on an ad hoc basis utilizing federal funds. Adding maternal death reviews to the Fatality Review Teams' list of parameters would provide better alignment and structure, be a more efficient use of resources, and ensure this important work can continue.

Regarding the recommendations for both SB 174 and SB 177, DHS made similar recommendations to the UDRS Committee in writing, as the Committee debated the legislative proposals at its November 2022 and December 2022 hearings. In its comments to the UDRS Committee, DHS noted that it generally agreed with the concepts being advanced by the Committee, but resources would be necessary to implement the provisions of the bills.

DHS thanks the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families for the opportunity to submit testimony for information only on the UDRS Committee's package of bills. DHS is also appreciative for the significant amount of collaboration with the UDRS Committee and in that spirit would like to continue efforts to ensure the proposals contained in the bills can be put into effect.



September 20, 2023

TO: Senate Committee on Health

FROM: Dr. Agnieszka Rogalska, Chief Medical Examiner for Dane County

RE: Testimony on SB 176

Good Afternoon, Chair Cabral-Guevara and members of the Senate Committee on Health

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the regulatory guidelines for the Coroner and Medical Examiner community. I am not testifying in opposition to the creation of guidelines, but rather to discuss the agency which is best suited to examine best practices of medicolegal death investigation, and to ask you to consider the formation of a Board of Medicolegal Investigation charged with: the establishment of criteria for Medicolegal death investigation, standardized mandatory training, a certification process, and means of regulating the profession by qualified medicolegal experts.

Standards of best practice already exist, in the form of national guidelines provided by the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the National Association of Medical Examiners, and the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. They outline basic protocols for the integrity of the investigation; establish core knowledge requirements for accurate and timely investigation; ensure independence of the medicolegal investigation in a process that involves many partners and many pressures to identify a cause and manner of death; and most importantly, provide the examination standards and certification by which an individual can claim achievement of these competencies.

Indeed, most states in the country have adopted such standards for certification of Medicolegal Death Investigators by experts in the field. Unfortunately, Wisconsin is one of the 4 remaining states which do NOT have a process for training and qualifying Medicolegal Death Investigators by these established guidelines, and provides neither training nor certification to those who dedicate themselves to serving their communities. And in this respect, your consideration of establishing guidelines is an important step to improving death investigation in Wisconsin. However, the creation of standards, in order to be effective, should be under the auspices of individuals who are themselves experienced, trained, and serve as subject matter experts in the field at hand. Although I have great respect for the work and people from the Department of

Health Services, I know from working closely with them in various capacities that they are not subject matter experts in medicolegal death investigation. Nor do they claim to be.

Department of Health Services and Medicolegal Death Investigation might share words such as “health” and “medical”, but they are wholly unrelated professions. Medicolegal investigation is a very specific profession, not necessarily related to medical practice as the name suggests. There are elements of medicine, law, scene investigation, ethics, and forensic science that are outside the scope of those not directly involved in its practice. The fact that guidelines from organizations like the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the National Association of Medical Examiners, and the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators have been omitted in the discussions of this committee exemplifies the disparity between what already exists and what may not be known or have been considered in this process.

One of the cardinal tenets of medicolegal death investigation is the independence of death investigation from other agencies, such as the Department of Health Services, law enforcement, Public Health, the District Attorney’s Office or the court. The Coroner/Medical Examiner and their representatives, must be independent entities in order to make hard decisions about cause and manner of death without fear of retribution from a stakeholder in the process. By the core mission of death investigation— by THE BEST PRACTICE, the Coroner/Medical Examiner must be able to use guidelines outlined by agencies like the National Institute of Justice, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the National Association of Medical Examiners, the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators, and the American Board of Pathology. Placing the regulation of Coroner and Medical Examiner practice under the umbrella of any other agency takes away that independence, and diminishes the integrity of the profession.

If the legislative body want to improve death investigation in Wisconsin, they must form and support a governing body of **qualified experts** in the field. A Medicolegal Death Investigation Board, comprised of forensic pathologists, investigators, coroners, and partners and stakeholders -**independent of an umbrella agency**, would be the most effective group to create a formal training and certification process; hold regulatory authority for the maintenance of certification and continuing education; and provide a sustainable system by which to improve death investigation in Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Coroner and Medical Examiner Association (WCMEA) has worked for close to 30 years advocating for amendments to SS 979 to ensure these best practices are in place. I refer you to the discussions surrounding SB 153 from 2016, and encourage you to read the materials I have submitted for your review. We have already had the discussions with the Coroners and Medical Examiners of Wisconsin, and the interested stakeholders. We have devised a budgetary plan to implement and sustain a Board of the caliber I described. And we have solicited the support and investment of the community who you would like to regulate. In essence, we have already done all the work, and we have a group eager to participate. We are asking for your support to finally act. I am here not to represent an organization – the WCMEA,



but the individual coroners and medical examiners who are affected by your bill, and who have asked me to bring forth this opportunity.

In essence, we the Coroner and Medical Examiner community of Wisconsin, are asking you to give us the privilege of being certified and acknowledged by our betters and peers in our very specific profession. If you truly want to make a change in the quality of death investigation, and you are ready to implement the best practice that we have been fighting for, I urge you to consider taking this opportunity to create a Medicolegal Death Investigation Board comprised of subject matter experts in the field of medicolegal death investigation to train, certify and guide our professionals.



September 20, 2023

**Re: Senate Bills 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, and 178**

Dear Chairperson Sen. Cabral-Guevara and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for hearing this package of bills which deals with a difficult topic that brings joy to none, but where action can bring life and hope to so many. As the lead agency for coordinating suicide prevention strategies in Wisconsin, Mental Health America of Wisconsin played an instrumental role to inform these bills and supports the unanimous vote of approval the bills received by the Legislative Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards.

One of the primary strategies of suicide prevention in Wisconsin revolves around improving data surveillance around vital records.<sup>1</sup> After months of active research performed by the Legislative Study Committee, it became abhorrently clear that Wisconsin's vital records system depends entirely on obsolete technology and upon a workforce that lacks minimum core competencies. These effects can cause disastrous consequences for bereaved families who are unable to access death benefits, validate military service, or lay individuals to rest according to their religious beliefs. Reducing the effects of trauma, stress, and grief reduces suicide risk.

The ability for prevention programs to share and learn from vital record data is also crucial to developing strategies that respond to changes in the environment. Limiting vital records to one occupation loses access to essential public health information related to exposure to workforce dangers or stress. Further, public health objectives suffer from lack of effective data sharing. The bills proposed in this package provide permissive guidance on how to improve these practices by codifying statewide and national best practices.

Personally, I was honored and humbled to serve on the Legislative Study Committee on Uniform Death Reporting Standards as a subject-matter expert. Mental Health America of Wisconsin strongly supports the passage of SB173, SB174, SB175, SB176, SB177, and SB178. While each is strong in their own right, their impact to reduce suicide in Wisconsin is greater than the sum of their parts.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Michel', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Brian J. Michel, J.D.  
*Chief Operating Officer*  
**Mental Health America of Wisconsin**

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<sup>1</sup> Prevent Suicide Wisconsin. Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact and Response. September, 2020.