

2023 Budget Supplemental Questions

Please answer the following questions in a word document and return to Council. The answers to these questions will be provided to council as supplemental information. While not part of the physical budget presentation to Council, departments should be prepared to answer questions Council may have on these supplemental questions. If you feel that you have provided an answer in a previous question, please don't repeat your answer, simply refer to the earlier question/answer.

Strategic Goals

1. Provide your 2023 strategic goals; how are they different from 2022? In what way, if at all, are your strategic changes demonstrated in your budget request?

-Our goals have not changed. Our office continues to focus on providing the best medico-legal death investigations possible. We plan to continue providing excellent forensic pathology services statewide through our contracted counties.

-There is a need for our assistance due to a nationwide and statewide shortage of forensic pathologists. This is exacerbated by the increased case load caused by COVID-19 (and associated effects of COVID-19) along with the continuing opioid epidemic.

Once we have fully onboarded our two new Associate MEs, we will begin offering our services to the rest of the state again. This will bring in revenue for Snohomish County.

-For 2023, we requested funding for a portable x-ray machine. This will better prepare us for mass fatalities, allow us to provide assistance to neighboring counties, and keep our workflow going while the main x-ray machine is being serviced. Additionally, the purchasing of a portable x-ray machine will assist in containing contagious diseases as it can be rolled into the isolation suite, preventing the need to move the contagious decedent across the main autopsy suite.

National, state and local landscape:

1. What are the federal, state, and local issues facing your work? What risks or opportunities does that create for you in 2023 and beyond? What is your plan to leverage the opportunity or mitigate the risk? What support do you need?

-Directly impacting us is a nationwide and statewide shortage of forensic pathologists and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future until future generations gain an interest in the field and begin entering the workforce. We once again plan to assist other counties in this shortage by offering our forensic pathology services to counties in need (once our two new Associate MEs are trained). Not only are we providing services statewide, but we are bringing in revenue for Snohomish County.

-The shortage of MEs in Snohomish County has been mitigated through raising the salary for the two open positions to a more competitive range. Two new Associate MEs have been hired and are likely to begin working in 2023. This increase in salary will ideally increase retention for these two highly specialized and absolutely necessary positions.

-There is likely to be a continued increase in caseloads due to the COVID-19 effects (for example: increased drug and alcohol use, lack of medical care, decreased mental health, continued opioid epidemic, etc.). During 2022, we've also seen an increase in homicides, which take significantly longer to examine than other cases.

2. What, if any, new mandates do you have impacting your work? Are they funded or unfunded? What is the plan for accomplishing the work?

-HB 1326 was passed, which requires medical examiner and coroner offices to be accredited by NAME or IACME. We are currently accredited by NAME. No further cost should be incurred.

-HB 1326 also included an increase in reimbursement for autopsy services (which is only available to offices who are accredited by NAME or IACEM). Since we're accredited by NAME, we will be able to obtain these higher reimbursement rates.

Programs

1. List programs, projects and services within your department funded through federal COVID/ARPA funds. What, if any, of those programs are you recommending ongoing funding for and what is the source of ongoing funding?

None.

2. What new programs are you launching for 2023? What need or efficiency is that new program addressing? How is that program funded for sustainability? What metrics are in place to determine effectiveness?

We will be once again offering forensics pathology services to the rest of Washington state. We had to pause offering these services due to only having one ME. By SCMEO temporarily refusing any outside county cases, it has created a massive strain on the state, including a homicide victim having to wait approximately two weeks for an autopsy. This creates a gap in quality of forensic exam (due to decomposition and decay of evidence) and potentially prosecution (due to collection of time-sensitive evidence).

The need this addresses is the lack of forensic pathologists state- and nation-wide. This program will benefit Snohomish County as each exam we complete incurs a charge from the originating county. The number of autopsies and exams performed by each doctor is closely monitored so as not to lose accreditation by violating the maximum of 250 NAME Standard Autopsies (full autopsies + (external exams/3)).

3. If different than #2, what are your areas of significant investment? What are you not doing because of that investment?

The most significant new additions for 2023 will include the Lodox x-ray machine, the increased salaries for the doctors, and funding to purchase a mobile x-ray machine.

The Lodox will be installed by the end of 2022, but use will likely begin January 2023. Having a Lodox x-ray machine will decrease risk of injury to our pathology assistants, and they will no longer have to manipulate bodies to get a quality x-ray. The Lodox scans the entire body in about 10 seconds. This will also greatly increase the speed at which bodies are processed.

Raising the salary of all three doctors will promote retention in these most critical positions.

The purchase of a mobile x-ray machine will aid Snohomish County in the event of a mass fatality or when the Lodox is down. This purchase will allow us to offer aid to neighboring counties in the event of a disaster.

Internal Operations

1. What is your department doing to streamline processes or deliver services in a new way? **Using contracted forensic pathologists to cover while we wait for the two positions to begin in January 2023.**
How do your budget allocation requests play into these innovations? **We've increased the salary for all three ME positions to hopefully retain these talented individuals so that we're not left in this position again.**
Are there ways which a different budget approach, e.g. several departments sharing a resource, could achieve the same or better results in a more cost-effective way? **Not that I can see.**

2. What, if any, hiring challenges are you experiencing? How is that affecting your level of service or internal operations? How are you mitigating those operational challenges and/or what is your plan for recruitment?

As mentioned several times throughout this document (I apologize for sounding like a broken record) our biggest hiring challenge was finding forensic pathologists to even consider applying for our two vacant positions. This was largely due to the salary offered being uncompetitive.

This has placed an immense strain on the entire office, but namely Dr. Lacy (Chief ME), Nicole Daugherty (Operations Manager), Rob Karinen (Chief Medical Investigator), and our entire pathology staff. It also placed a strain on the state's coroner system as we could no longer support them.

Dr. Lacy is impacted in that he is the only doctor available to our office. He's also the chief, leaving him with many administrative responsibilities above and beyond that which an Associate ME would have to bear. He's also on-call 24/7.

To raise the morale of the pathology staff, we've focused on having team-building events and exciting staff meetings. Management has also kept an open dialogue with employees and tend to their needs during this difficult time as best we can.

3. Please provide a list of all vacant position titles, position codes, date vacated, and date first posted. This should be a separate page or spreadsheet attachment.

None. (Two vacant Associate ME positions are filled and set to begin work in January 2023.)

4. What effect has the increase of inflation and/or supply chain issues had on your department? What, if any, services, or projects have you had to adjust to accommodate for this? (i.e. moving to outside contracted services, delaying of project starts and/or purchasing, redistribution of workload, etc.)

Obtaining swab kits (for COVID, flu, etc.) have been incredibly difficult to obtain. The state is even experiencing a shortage. We've been given extra kits by neighboring counties and also resorted to using saline as a media, which is less than ideal.

Purchasing PPE (masks, gloves, etc.) has been difficult, though not as difficult as in 2020 and 2021. Given the recent difficulties in ordering PPE in 2020 and 2021, we bulk order supplies when they're available so that our staff can be protected while performing their job duties.

Prices of PPE has skyrocketed and naturally puts a financial burden on the office.

If you count a forensic pathologist shortage as a supply chain issue, we've addressed that issue by contracting with independent forensic pathologists until our two new Associate MEs can begin in January 2023.

Successes

1. Take this opportunity to share one significant success in your department over this past year. What made it a success?

We hired two Associate MEs who are well qualified and are excellent matches for this office. This was achieved through raising the salary for the Associate ME position to something more competitive. Similarly, since our two new MEs won't start until January, we have relieved Dr. Lacy from being on-call 24/7 (or rather from being as on-call as he would normally be in the absence of contractors) using several contracted forensic pathologists. This is important to prevent Dr. Lacy from becoming overwhelmed as he's currently occupying his own position while also covering for two Associate MEs.