

Secretaries Landgraf and Schiliro Propose Medical Examiner's Office be Recognized as New Division of Forensic Science within Department of Safety and Homeland Security

DOVER (May 14, 2014) – In an effort to better meet the needs of Delaware's criminal justice system, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Secretary Rita Landgraf and Department of Safety and Homeland Security Secretary (DSHS) Lewis Schiliro proposed to reorganize the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner as the Division of Forensic Science and move it from DHSS to DSHS.

Appearing before a joint committee hearing Wednesday of the Senate Public Safety and the House Safety & Homeland Security committees, the two Cabinet secretaries also proposed creating the Forensic Science Commission to provide oversight and support to the work of the Division of Forensic Science. The Commission would be located in the Office of the Secretary of the Department of Safety and Homeland Security and include representatives of the Department of Safety and Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Social Services, the criminal justice community, law enforcement, academic experts on forensic science, and legislators.

The Commission would have oversight of the Division of Forensic Science, including review of its operations, staffing

and resource needs, quality assurance, evidence protocols, responsiveness to the criminal justice community, accreditation and audit needs, and maintenance of the professional independence of its expert staff. The Commission would also consider whether additional changes in the structure or the organization of forensic sciences in Delaware would be more efficient or make the office more effective.

Finally, Secretary Landgraf and Secretary Schiliro proposed reforms to the leadership structure of the office. Reflecting the broad set of responsibilities in the office, the secretaries proposed to replace the requirement that the office be led by a certified pathologist with a requirement that the Secretary of Safety and Homeland Security appoint a division director with expertise in the forensic sciences. The role of the Chief Medical Examiner would be preserved within the division, but it would no longer have a 10-year term and both the Division Director and Chief Medical Examiner would be exempt positions.

“There is no doubt that expert forensic science is at the core of our work in the criminal justice system,” Governor Jack Markell said. “The proposal today from Secretary Landgraf and Secretary Schiliro is a significant reform that will not only help address concerns with the office today, but will create a structure that will keep us on the forefront in the future.”

“This reorganization is done around the core mission of the Medical Examiner’s Office, which is to provide forensic services in the support of the criminal justice system,” Secretary Landgraf said. “It makes sense to move those services completely within the Department of Safety and Homeland Security, where greater coordination and efficiency can be obtained.”

“These reforms are going to help ensure that the important work done by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is fully integrated within the criminal justice community,” Secretary

Schiliro said. "The Department already manages other areas that support our criminal justice efforts, such as the Council on Police Training, and emergency communications, and other forensic resources located in law enforcement. Today's proposed reforms will improve the coordination of our criminal investigations, and oversight from the proposed Forensic Science Commission will make certain that the professional independence of the new division's staff is maintained."

Secretary Landgraf and Secretary Schiliro said if the changes are approved by the General Assembly, they hope the transition could begin as soon as the first quarter of the state's new fiscal year, which begins July 1.