



Representative Larry Householder
72nd House District
Sponsor Testimony – HB 146

Chair Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, members of the House State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on HB 146. HB 146 requires a coroner to go before a Court of Common Pleas before changing the cause of death on a death certificate. This legislation will allow for the changing of death certificates to be a more open process. Under current law, a coroner is not required to give an explanation when changing a death certificate, the first time. If a family is unhappy with change, the burden is on them to prove that the coroner is wrong. This bill puts the burden on government to explain why the change is needed.

The flaw in this policy became tragically evident earlier this year when the Franklin County Coroner changed the death certificate of Debbie Meadows. Mrs. Meadows died in 2014 of injuries she sustained when she was hit by a repeat drunk driver, Timothy Castle. She died 11 days later. Originally, the coroner's pathologist declared the cause of death blunt-force trauma from the accident. Franklin County Prosecutor, Ron O'Brien, charged the drunk driver with vehicular manslaughter. Early this year – in the middle of the court proceedings against Mr. Castle – the Meadows family received a new death certificate in the mail. The new certificate stated that Debbie had died from melanoma. No explanation was given to the family. No explanation was given to the prosecutor. Ron O'Brien was forced to drop the felony-vehicular manslaughter charge, and Mr. Castle walked away with a misdemeanor DUI conviction. Mrs. Meadows did have melanoma, but melanoma did not kill her. Her death certificate was changed by a coroner who was not even in office when Mrs. Meadows died. In fact, the original coroner still stands by the original death certificate.

This is not the only case where the Franklin Coroner's office has failed to contact law enforcement when it has changed death certificates. Recently, the Dispatch reported on the death of 11-year-old Shakyla Henry. Shakyla died from complications resulting from being shaken

severely as an infant by her father. The coroner's office, almost a year after the death of Shakyla, changed her cause of death from natural causes to a homicide. In this case, they seem to have corrected a bad first certificate. What they did not do, is notify law enforcement. Our prosecutors rely heavily on coroners to do their job. This bill will provide transparency. In the case of Shakyla it would have given law enforcement the background to prosecute a father who killed his daughter. In the case of Debbie, it would have at the very least given the family some closure.

This bill is not about tying the hands of our coroners. It is about transparency and ensuring that our coroners, law enforcement and prosecutors are on the same page so that Ohio's families can find justice. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.