



Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City

20th CONGRESS
2nd Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 10319



Introduced by **REPRESENTATIVE JENNIFER A. LAGBAS**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The Philippines reportedly has only two practicing, board-certified forensic pathologists for the entire country; in practice, most medico-legal officers are general physicians who receive only internal, on-the-job training rather than a formal forensic pathology residency. Standards for determining when a death is "reportable" and requires investigation are scattered across Presidential Decree No. 856 (Sanitation Code), DOJ Circular No. 20 (2023), DOJ Circular No. 13 (2007), and DOH Administrative Order No. 2010-0033, with no single, unified system. Calls for an independent, science-based death investigation system have circulated publicly since at least 2021, following controversies over deaths in custody and law enforcement operations, and the University of the Philippines Manila launched the country's first Master's program in Forensic Medicine in February 2026, itself a response to the recognized specialist shortage. This shortage, combined with fragmented standards and insufficiently independent review of medico-legal findings in sensitive cases, raises ongoing concerns about the reliability and impartiality of death investigations, while unidentified or unclaimed cadavers often go without systematic identification or proper record-keeping.

Article II, Section 11 of the Constitution commits the State to value the dignity of every human person and guarantee full respect for human rights, a duty implicated whenever the true cause of death is not properly established, while Article III, Section 1 on equal protection underlies the requirement that medico-legal examination apply uniformly regardless of faith, ethnicity, or social status, and Rule 128 of the Rules of Court on the admissibility of evidence supports the bill's verification mechanism for medico-legal findings used in judicial proceedings.

The bill mandates medico-legal examination for all reportable deaths before burial or cremation may proceed, and creates a verification mechanism allowing a second qualified forensic

specialist, chosen by judicial or prosecutorial authorities, to review findings, with verified reports carrying full evidentiary weight. It establishes a national accreditation system for forensic medicine specialists through the PRC, PMA, and Philippine Forensic Medicine Society, and requires independent review and, where appropriate, a shift in institutional jurisdiction, such as from PNP to NBI, for sensitive cases to prevent conflicts of interest. For unidentified cadavers, it requires standardized identification protocols using DNA, dental, and fingerprint analysis, and humane, properly documented interment by the local government unit. The bill further mandates training and capacity-building, dedicated funding for forensic infrastructure, and legal protection and counsel for medico-legal officers sued in connection with their official duties.

In view of the above, passage of this bill is earnestly sought.



HON. JENNIFER A. LAGBAS
Representative
First District, Misamis Oriental



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Introduced by **REPRESENTATIVE JENNIFER A. LAGBAS**

AN ACT
MANDATING THE CONDUCT OF MEDICO-LEGAL EXAMINATION OF THE
DEAD, INSTITUTIONALIZING A STANDARDIZED MEDICOLEGAL DEATH
INVESTIGATION (MLDI) SYSTEM, DEFINING THE ROLES OF MEDICOLEGAL
OFFICERS AND MEDICAL EXAMINERS, PROVIDING FOR
VERIFICATION OF REPORTS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

SECTION 1. *Short Title.* - This Act shall be known as the “Medico-Legal Death Investigation Act of 2026.”

SEC. 2. *Declaration of Policy.* - The State recognizes that the determination of the cause and manner of death is essential to justice, public health, and public order. To protect life, uphold due process, and provide closure to families, the State shall institutionalize a uniform, scientific, and impartial system of death investigation, ensuring that only qualified forensic medicine specialists whether designated as medico-legal officers or certified medical examiners, perform these examinations. This policy shall be implemented in harmony with religious and cultural beliefs without compromising the integrity of medico-legal procedures.

SEC. 3. *Definition of Terms.* -

- a) Accreditation System - A mechanism under Philippine Regulation Commission through its Accredited Professional Organization (APO), Philippine Medical Association through PFMS for certifying medico-legal officers and medical examiners to practice under uniform standards. As well as, other process of certification as defined by law;
- b) Autopsy - The scientific postmortem examination of a deceased person to determine the cause, manner, and circumstances of death. Kinds of autopsy include:

- i) **Clinical or Pathological Autopsy** - Conducted to study disease processes and evaluate medical treatment, typically within hospitals with consent from the family.
 - ii) **Medico-Legal or Forensic Autopsy** - Conducted when death is violent, suspicious, unexplained, or legally significant, usually ordered by authorities for investigative and judicial purposes.
 - iii) **Virtual or Imaging Autopsy** - A non-invasive examination using imaging modalities (e.g., CT or MRI scans) to document internal findings, used as supplemental or alternative method when feasible.
- c) **Cause of Death** - The disease, injury, or condition directly leading to death as determined by forensic medical examination;
- d) **Forensic Medical Examiner (FME)** - A physician who is a certified specialist in the field of forensic medicine, having undergone formal training, examinations, and accreditation by the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) through its specialty affiliate, the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS), or other recognized certifying bodies. FMEs possess expert competence to determine cause and manner of death and provide authoritative forensic medical findings;
- e) **Judicial Oversight** - The authority of the judiciary or prosecutorial bodies to request independent verification of medico-legal findings for use in legal proceedings;
- f) **Manner of Death** - The classification of death as natural, accidental, suicidal, homicidal, or undetermined based on forensic evidence;
- g) **Medico-Legal Death Investigation (MLDI)** - A systematic process that includes scene assessment, autopsy, histopathological, toxicological, and ancillary studies, documentation of findings, and determination of cause and manner of death;
- h) **Medico-Legal Function** - The performance by any physician, whether certified or not, of duties involving the application of forensic medicine practice, including examination, documentation, and reporting of findings relevant to legal or investigative purposes;
- i) **Medico-Legal Officer (MLO)**- A medical examiner serving under law enforcement or government agencies by virtue of official position and duty, such as those in the PNP Forensic Group, NBI Medico-Legal Division, Commission on Human Rights (CHR), Public Attorney's Office (PAO), or other institutions. MLOs are tasked with conducting medico-legal examinations, documenting findings, and providing expert testimony as part of their government mandate. While MLOs function as medical examiners by law, they may seek verification or collaboration with certified forensic medical examiners to ensure objectivity and adherence to uniform standards;
- j) **Medico-Legal Officers** - professionals appointed by virtue of law pursuant to PD 856 as defined;
- k) **Qualified Forensic Medicine Specialist** - A physician with recognized expertise in forensic medicine, certified by the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS), Philippine Medical Association specialty board;
- l) **Reportable Cases (death)** - All deaths that are violent, suspicious, unexplained, sudden, unattended, involving criminal liability, custodial situations, medico-legal significance, or as otherwise determined by DOJ Circular No. 20 (2023), DOJ Circular No. 13 (2007), PD 856 (1975), DOH Administrative Order No. 2010-0033, or other relevant laws and regulations;

- m) Sensitive Cases - Deaths involving allegations of torture, extrajudicial killings, deaths in custody, deaths arising from law enforcement operations, deaths of minors, or cases that have significant public interest or human rights implications requiring heightened transparency and independent verification;
- n) Standardized Medico-Legal Reporting - The use of uniform formats, documentation protocols, and chain-of-custody procedures to ensure consistency and reliability of medico-legal findings;
- o) Unknown or Unclaimed Cadaver - Any deceased individual whose identity is not immediately established or whose next of kin cannot be located; and
- p) Verification of Reports - The process by which medico-legal or medical examiner reports are reviewed by another qualified forensic medicine specialist of judicial or prosecutorial choice to ensure accuracy, impartiality, and adherence to standards.

SEC. 4. *Mandatory Medico-Legal Examination.* - All reportable deaths shall undergo medico-legal examination conducted by a qualified forensic medicine specialist. No burial, cremation, or other form of disposition shall proceed without proper medico-legal clearance in cases where death is reportable case under this Act.

SEC. 5. *Verification of Reports.* - All medico-legal or medical examiner reports shall be subjected to verification by a qualified forensic medicine specialist of judicial or prosecutorial choice to ensure accuracy, impartiality, and adherence to professional standards.

Verified reports shall carry full evidentiary weight in administrative, criminal, or civil proceedings. No medico-legal report submitted in cases covered under this Act shall be considered conclusive unless it has been reviewed and validated under this verification process when required by judicial or prosecutorial authorities.

SEC. 6. *Provisions for Known and Unknown Decedents.*

- a) Known Decedents - Mandatory autopsies for identified individuals ensure that:
 - i) Proper Documentation is Achieved - Death certificates and medico-legal reports must accurately reflect the cause and manner of death as mandated under Presidential Decree No. 856 (Sanitation Code) and DOH Administrative Order No. 2010-0033.
 - ii) The Family's Right to Truth and Justice is Protected - Families have the right to know whether death resulted from natural causes, accident, suicide, or homicide, consistent with the State's duty under Article II, Section 11 of the 1987 Constitution to value the dignity of every human person and guarantee full respect for human rights.
 - iii) Evidence is Preserved Before Burial or Cremation - Ensuring no vital evidence is lost or destroyed, consistent with DOJ Circular No. 20 (2023), which requires medico-legal investigation in all reportable deaths.
- b) Unknown or Unclaimed Cadavers - Medico-legal examination for unidentified or unclaimed individuals shall:
 - i) Establish Identity Using Forensic Methods - Including DNA profiling, dental examination, fingerprinting, pursuant to PNP and NBI protocols on identification

- of remains and any other scientifically validated methods developed and accepted as infallible following the effectivity of this law.
- ii) Determine Cause and Manner of Death - Ensuring proper classification for public health and criminal investigation purposes.
 - iii) Preserve Evidence for Future References - Findings shall be properly recorded and stored to allow family members, judicial authorities, or law enforcement to access them later, protecting the chain of custody and ensuring compliance with Rules of Court, Rule 128 (Evidence).
 - iv) Implement Standardized Documentation and Custody Protocols - All examinations must follow uniform procedures to support the established procedures by DOJ, PNP, NBI and other related agencies to ensure integrity and accessibility of medico-legal data.
 - v) Ensure Proper and Humane Interment -- The local government unit (LGU) where the body is discovered shall provide a marked grave in a public cemetery, properly documented and recorded for potential future retrieval. Records of the interment, including photographs, burial location maps, and corresponding identification codes, shall be maintained by the LGU to ensure availability and accessibility when needed.

SEC. 7. *Harmonization with Religious and Cultural Beliefs.* - The implementation of this Act shall respect and accommodate religious practices, cultural customs, and the sensitivities of families, without compromising the objectives of justice, public welfare, and forensic integrity. The following guidelines shall apply:

1. Respect for Religious Practices and Customs - Medico-legal examinations shall be conducted in a manner that minimizes intrusion on religious beliefs. Whenever feasible, minimally invasive autopsy techniques, virtual autopsy (imaging modalities), or rapid examinations shall be utilized when consistent with investigative needs and international standards.
2. Expedited Procedures - In recognition of religious groups that require prompt burial, the medico-legal process shall prioritize expedited examinations to avoid unnecessary delays while ensuring the integrity of forensic findings, consistent with Presidential Decree No. 856 (Sanitation Code), DOH Administrative Order No. 2010-0033, and DOJ Circular No. 20 (2023).
3. Information and Education Campaigns - The Department of Justice (DOJ) through National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) through Philippine National Police (PNP), Department of Health (DOH), Commission on Human Rights (CHR), Department of Education (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) shall collaborate with private institutions and professional organizations such as the Philippine Medical Association (PMA), the Philippine Academy of Family Physicians (PAFP), the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS), and other relevant stakeholders to jointly implement public information programs. These programs shall educate citizens, faith leaders, academic institutions, and local officials on the importance of medico-legal examinations for justice, public safety, and human rights.

The campaigns shall also explain how forensic examinations can be performed respectfully and consistently with religious and cultural norms, while highlighting the professional standards upheld by both government agencies and private medical societies to ensure impartiality, transparency, and competence in the practice of Philippine Forensic Medicine.

4. Consultation with Religious and Community Leaders - Implementing agencies shall engage religious groups, indigenous peoples, and local communities in dialogue to create culturally sensitive protocols that maintain scientific rigor and legal validity.
5. Non-Discrimination and Equal Protection - Medico-legal examinations shall be applied uniformly to all persons regardless of faith, ethnicity, or social status. No group shall be exempted solely on religious or cultural grounds when a death is legally reportable, in accordance with Article III, Section 1 of the 1987 Constitution guaranteeing equal protection of the laws.

SEC. 8. *Standardization, Accreditation, and Oversight.*

1. National Investigative Mandate - The Philippine National Police (PNP) shall serve as the primary national investigative body responsible for implementing the medico-legal death investigation system to investigate crimes, preserve evidence, and support the administration of justice. The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) shall exercise concurrent investigative authority in appropriate cases.
2. Employment and Role of Medical Examiners - Medico-legal officers of the PNP Forensic Group and the NBI Medico-Legal Division shall perform medico-legal examinations as part of their institutional mandates. In the absence of available personnel, courts, prosecutors, the PNP, or the NBI may engage certified forensic medical examiners, or health officers provided, that any such examination shall be conducted under the supervision or verification of a certified forensic medicine specialist or PNP/NBI medico-legal officer to ensure accuracy, objectivity, and compliance with professional and legal standards.
3. National Accreditation System - The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), through its professional arm, the Philippine Medical Association (PMA), and its specialty affiliate, the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS), shall establish and oversee a comprehensive accreditation system for forensic medicine.

This accreditation shall certify only duly registered physicians who perform medico-legal functions as medico-legal officers or medical examiners under this Act. The PRC shall instruct and coordinate with the DOJ, DOH, DILG, PNP Forensic Group, NBI Medico-Legal Division, LGUs, and other appropriate agencies to adopt and employ a uniform Philippine Forensic Medicine practice nationwide. This guarantees uniform standards of competence, ethical practice, and accountability, harmonizing medico-legal procedures across jurisdictions.

4. Uniform Medico-Legal Reporting Protocols - Standardized formats, documentation procedures, and chain-of-custody protocols shall be adopted nationwide to ensure consistency, scientific integrity, and legal admissibility of medico-legal findings. These protocols shall be regularly updated to incorporate new scientific methods and technologies deemed reliable and infallible following the effectivity of this law.

5. Oversight and Audits - The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) shall jointly oversee all investigations requiring forensic medicine examination or medico-legal operations to ensure proper implementation, impartiality, and compliance with the law. Professional competency and adherence to medical standards shall be monitored and verified by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) in coordination with the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) through its specialty affiliate, the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS).

This system of oversight shall include periodic audits, performance evaluations, and compliance reviews. Findings from such audits shall be made accessible to judicial and prosecutorial authorities to reinforce transparency, accountability, and public trust in the medico-legal process, while ensuring that both investigative and professional standards are upheld.

SEC. 9. *International and Comparative Best Practices.* - The implementation of this Act shall incorporate internationally accepted standards and best practices in medico-legal death investigation to ensure independence, scientific rigor, and consistency nationwide. The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), through the Board of Medicine, is hereby mandated, in coordination with and by enjoining the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) and its specialty affiliate, the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS), to formalize and administer an accreditation and certification system for training physicians who wish to specialize in forensic medicine practice.

This system shall establish structured training programs, written and practical examinations, proficiency testing, and other rigorous forms of evaluation to ensure that only qualified experts are certified to perform medico-legal examinations. The accreditation standards shall be benchmarked against globally recognized criteria and practices employed by leading international forensic institutions and professional organizations, and recognized forensic medicine boards worldwide.

SEC. 10. *Checks and Balances to Ensure Transparency and Objectivity.* - To preserve the integrity of medico-legal death investigations, the following safeguards shall be institutionalized:

- a) Independent Review of Sensitive Cases - In all institutional deaths, including those occurring in places of detention, penal institutions, medical facilities under government control, or in cases arising from operations of law enforcement or state agents, the medico-legal examination shall be conducted by the Law Enforcement Counterpart such as PNP-NBI or NBI-PNP and may be subjected to verification by a forensic medical specialist who is:
 - i) endorsed or recommended by the Judiciary, Executive, or Legislative branch, or
 - ii) A Philippine-certified forensic medicine specialist, and
 - iii) not directly affiliated with the institution involved in the death under investigation.
- b) Institutional Counterpart Assignment - Where appropriate, the examination may be referred to a different institutional counterpart (e.g., shifting jurisdiction from the PNP to the NBI or vice versa) to prevent conflicts of interest and maintain impartiality.

- c) **Mandatory Documentation and Transparency** - All autopsy findings, reports, and documentation in such cases shall be:
 - i) subject to review by another qualified forensic medicine specialist;
 - ii) submitted, upon order of competent court, to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and other relevant oversight bodies, and made available to the courts, prosecution, or legislative inquiry as necessary to ensure transparency;
- d) **Public Accountability** - Summaries of reviewed cases falling within definition of Sensitive Cases shall be reported annually by the DOJ, in coordination with the PFMS and the Department of Health (DOH), to Congress to ensure ongoing policy review, adherence to standards, and protection of human rights.

SEC. 11. *Capacity Building, Training Support, and Professional Development.* - To maintain the highest standards of medico-legal practice and ensure that institutional medico-legal officers remain competent and current with advances in the field, the following measures shall be mandated:

- a) **Guaranteed Access to Local and International Training** - All medico-legal officers of the PNP Forensic Group, the NBI Medico-Legal Division, and qualified health officers of LGUs shall be granted priority access to local, regional, and international training programs, fellowships, workshops, and conferences relevant to forensic medicine and medico-legal death investigation. This shall include opportunities to engage with globally recognized forensic institutions, participate in collaborative research, and undergo skills development programs.
- b) **Sustainable Budget Allocation** - Adequate funding shall be appropriated and made available through Peace and Order Councils, the General Appropriations Act, or other authorized government funding mechanisms to cover training fees, travel, accommodation, instructional materials, and other related costs. This ensures that training is not hindered by financial limitations at the institutional or local government level.
- c) **Standardized Curriculum and Global Alignment** - The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) shall enforce a standardized specialization training program in Forensic Medicine to be adopted and implemented by the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) and its specialty affiliate, the Philippine Forensic Medicine Society (PFMS). These standards shall serve as the basis for certifying physicians as qualified forensic medicine specialists.
- d) The curriculum shall be benchmarked against international best practices and updated regularly to reflect advances in forensic science, such as: toxicology, digital autopsy, imaging technologies, anthropology, and other emerging fields of forensic medicine.

The DOJ, DOH, DILG, PNP, and NBI shall be duly informed of the qualifications and competencies of all professionals engaged in forensic medicine practice. Physicians certified under these standards shall perform as medico-legal officers within their respective institutions for specific mandates and duties, ensuring that only properly qualified experts are appointed or designated to carry out medico-legal examinations under this Act.

- e) **Mandatory Continuing Education and Certification** - Participation in approved training programs shall be mandatory for accreditation and reaccreditation under Section 8(c). Continuous professional education (CPE) credits, proficiency testing, and periodic

assessments shall be required to ensure that all medico-legal officers maintain their competence and adhere to evolving scientific and ethical standards.

- f) Institutional Reporting and Accountability - Agencies employing medicolegal officers (PNP, NBI, and LGU Health Officers) may be audited with submission of annual reports to Congress, DILG and DOJ detailing training activities, compliance levels, and measurable improvements in medico-legal performance as a result of capacity-building initiatives.

SEC. 12. *Funding for Infrastructure, Equipment, Training, and Maintenance.* - To ensure the effective implementation of this Act, the State shall provide adequate and sustained funding for the modernization, maintenance, and strengthening of medico-legal services nationwide.

- a) Infrastructure Development and Maintenance - Appropriations shall be allocated for the construction, renovation, regular upkeep, and improvement of facilities of the PNP Forensic Group, the NBI Medico-Legal Division, and other government health offices performing medico-legal functions at the regional level, at the least, including satellite offices, to ensure that medico-legal examinations are conducted in secure, sanitary, and well-maintained environments accessible throughout the country.
- b) Procurement and Upkeep of Equipment and Technology - Initial funding shall prioritize the establishment of necessary infrastructure and the acquisition of essential equipment required for the proper conduct of forensic medical examinations. Succeeding budget allocations shall focus on the acquisition, maintenance, calibration, and periodic upgrading of forensic tools and equipment, such as autopsy rooms, digital imaging systems, toxicology, serological, and histopathology laboratories, and secure evidence storage facilities. Emerging technologies, including virtual autopsy systems and advanced documentation platforms, shall also be supported.
- c) Training and Professional Development - Dedicated resources shall be earmarked to support continuous local and international training programs for all medico-legal officers, forensic specialists under the PNP, NBI, and qualified LGU health officers. These programs shall align with international best practices and ensure that all personnel remain updated with the latest scientific methods, ethical guidelines, and investigative protocols, including locally available training programs accredited by the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) in relation to forensic medicine.
- d) Local Government Unit (LGU) Funding Obligations - Local Government Units shall allocate funds within their jurisdictions to support infrastructure, equipment, and training for medico-legal services as well as logistical support outside the direct cognizance of national law enforcement agencies, ensuring that every province, city, and municipality has adequate capacity to assist in implementing duties and responsibilities of this Act.
- e) Exclusive Use and Accountability - Funding and usage under this Section shall be exclusive for the purposes indicated herein. All expenditures and logistics shall be subject to annual reporting, audit, and verification by the Commission on Audit (COA) in accordance with its processes on transparency and accountability. Implementing agencies and LGUs shall submit detailed reports on the disbursement of funds, status of infrastructure, and outcomes of training programs to ensure strict compliance.
- f) Budgetary Source - The funds necessary for these purposes shall be charged against current appropriations of the DOJ, DILG, DOH, LGUs, and other relevant agencies, with subsequent allocations to be included in the annual General Appropriations Act. Peace

and Order Councils and other authorized funding mechanisms may also be utilized to augment resources.

SEC. 13. *Duties of Heads of Offices.* - The Heads of Offices shall establish and maintain an independent and effective internal mechanism designed to:

- a) Safeguard Medico-Legal Officers against retaliatory, vexatious, or harassment suits that may be filed in connection with, or arising out of, the lawful discharge of their official medico-legal functions and examinations; and
- b) Ensure the provision of free and adequate legal assistance to all Medico-Legal Officers facing service-related cases, whether criminal, civil, administrative, or quasi-judicial in nature, including proceedings before the prosecutor's office, courts of law, quasi-judicial or administrative bodies, or any other competent tribunal, in relation to the performance of their official duties.

For this purpose, retired, honorably discharged, or otherwise lawfully separated Medico-Legal Officers shall likewise be entitled to free legal assistance for service-related cases or causes of action that originated or arose while they were still in active service.

Within ninety (90) days from the effectivity of this Act, the DOJ, DOH, DILG, and PRC with PMA shall jointly promulgate the necessary rules and regulations to implement its provisions.

SECTION 14. *Implementing Rules and Regulations.* - Within ninety (90) days from the effectivity of this Act, the DOJ, DOH, DILG, and PRC with PMA shall jointly promulgate the necessary rules and regulations to implement its provisions.

SECTION 15. *Appropriations.* - The amount necessary for the initial implementation of this Act shall be charged against current appropriations of concerned agencies. Thereafter, funds shall be included in the annual General Appropriations Act.

SECTION 16. *Separability Clause.* - If any part of this Act is declared unconstitutional or invalid, the remaining provisions shall remain in full force and effect.

SECTION 17. *Repealing Clause.* - All laws, decrees, orders, rules, and regulations inconsistent with this Act are hereby repealed or amended accordingly.

SECTION 18. *Effectivity.* - This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,