



Nathan Vasquez, Multnomah County District Attorney

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July 2, 2026

via email only

Isabel Funk
Reporter
The Oregonian
ifunk@oregonian.com

Robert E. Sinnott
Senior Assistant County Attorney
Multnomah County Attorney's Office
robert.sinnott@multco.us

Re: Petition of Isabel Funk concerning records of the Multnomah County Medical Examiner

Dear Ms. Funk and Mr. Sinnott:

Isabel Funk, a reporter for The Oregonian, petitions this office to order the Multnomah County Medical Examiner to disclose the manner of death for 24 individuals whose bodies were recovered from the Willamette and Columbia rivers in 2025. Petitioner submitted an Oregon Public Records Law request for this information to the Multnomah County Medical Examiner. Recognizing the potential countervailing interests, and sensitivity of the Medical Examiner to those interests, petitioner alternatively sought disaggregated statistics: the number of those deaths attributable to suicide, without identifying which decedent was associated with which cause of death.

The Medical Examiner denied both versions of the request under ORS 192.345(36) and ORS 432.350. Petitioner then sought review by this office as permitted by ORS 192.415.

For the reasons below, I grant the petition in part.

DISCUSSION

A. The Medical Examiner Exemption — ORS 192.345(36)

ORS 192.345(36) conditionally exempts from disclosure “a medical examiner’s report, autopsy report or laboratory test report ordered by a medical examiner.” The manner of death determinations petitioner seeks are drawn from the Medical Examiner’s files, and data maintained in the Medical Examiner’s reporting system is a “medical examiner’s report” within the exemption. *Petition of Sondag*, Att’y Gen. PRO (July 30, 2021). The records are therefore exempt unless the public interest requires their disclosure in this particular instance.

ORS 192.345(36) serves two distinct interests: the efficacy of the Medical Examiner's investigative function and the privacy of surviving families. *Petition of Hass*, Att'y Gen. PRO (Mar. 3, 2025) (identifying familial privacy among the interests the exemption protects). Both interests are at their zenith when the manner of death is suicide. The stigma attached to suicide inflicts harm on surviving families, above and beyond the grief of loss, when the determination becomes public. The cause of death determination results from an inquiry into available records, interviewing family members, and the autopsy itself. Cooperation of the family is voluntary and there is a public interest in facilitating the Medical Examiner's future access to voluntarily provided sensitive information.

Sondag, cited above, is similar to the present case, and provides the most compelling argument in favor of release. In *Sondag*, the Attorney General found that the public interest required release of information about the 83 individuals who died of hyperthermia in an extreme weather event in 2021. The petitioners sought the names to conduct investigative reporting following up on the deaths to identify holes in the safety net that allowed a shocking number of people to die as a result of weather.

Despite the other similarities to *Sondag*, suicide is different. Having reviewed the underlying data, I am not persuaded that it can be sufficiently disaggregated to accomplish anonymization within a small population that petitioner has already largely identified by name.

However, I reach a different result as to deaths occurring between April 1, 2025 and May 5, 2025. The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, in a May 5, 2025 press release, "Recent Body Recoveries In Our Rivers Are Tragic, Though Not Unusual," publicly stated that "the majority of the eight bodies recovered this April and May are the result of drowning caused by suicide."

The Sheriff's Office balanced the relevant interests and determined, notwithstanding the privacy interests articulated above, that it was in the community's interest to release additional information, at that time, in those particular cases.¹ That having been done, the County's privacy invasion argument as to the aggregate data that would confirm or rebut that representation is diminished and the public interest in testing the accuracy of this statement prevails.

B. Vital Records — ORS 432.350

The County separately argues that ORS 432.350 exempts this information from disclosure. While I question the applicability of this statute in this context (i.e. to information held outside of the Oregon Health Authority's Center for Health Statistics), I need not resolve that in this case.² As noted above, substantially all the information I am ordering released, has already been released.

¹ I do not here second guess that decision. This release made sense in the context of eight dead bodies found in local rivers over the span of a few weeks at a time when the investigation and arrest of an alleged serial killer was fresh in the community's mind.

² Taken to its logical extreme, the County's position would require the withholding of police investigative files in murder cases as they are "reports ... or information" relating to a cause of death registered with the Center for Health Statistics.

Any subsequent claim that it is exempt is accordingly waived. *Oregonian Publishing Co. v. Portland School District 1J*, 152 Or App 135, 142 (1998).

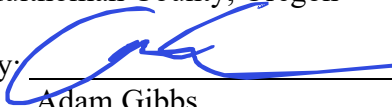
ORDER

The petition is granted in part. The Multnomah County Medical Examiner shall provide petitioner the manner of death for the individuals whose bodies were recovered from the Willamette and Columbia rivers between April 1, 2025 and May 5, 2025, in a manner that does not identify which decedent corresponds to which manner of death.

The petition is otherwise denied.

Regards,

NATHAN VASQUEZ
District Attorney
Multnomah County, Oregon

By: 
Adam Gibbs
General Counsel

Notice to Public Agency.

Pursuant to ORS 192.411, 192.415, and 192.431(3), your agency may become liable to pay petitioner's attorney fees in any court action arising from this public records petition (regardless of whether petitioner prevails on the merits of disclosure in court) if you do not comply with this order and also fail to issue, within seven days, formal notice of your intent to initiate court action to contest this order, or fail to file such court action within seven additional days thereafter.