

# Questions and Responses from Panel Discussion with Work Group Members Who Interact with the Vital Records System in Various Ways

*Q: What does a typical day look like in terms of your Vital Records work? What percentage of your day is spent doing Vital Records work? How does your work intersect with Vital Records work?*

**R:** The panel members feel that Vital Records is vital to their work. They value being able to work with Vital Records and appreciate the responsiveness and support. Without Vital Records, they would not have the resources and data they need to perform their duties and manage their agencies.

Panel members reported that 1/3 of their day is spent doing Vital Records, while others reported occasional work involving Vital Records.

A typical day for panel members can involve ordering Vital Records for a variety of reasons, such as determining custody, to help for Native Tribes establish lineage and Tribal enrollments, or to locate death certificates to help establish social security benefits for a child whose parent passes away. Other deal exclusively with death certificates and work directly with Funeral Homes who are issuing and assisting the family with obtaining death certificates and supporting estate administration.

Panel members rely on OVERS to search for information to verify names, dates of birth, family members on birth certificates to help child protective services with an assessment, as well as VitalChek, in Oregon as well as other counties around the nation. For estate administration, when a second spouse dies and matters involving the first spouse arise and a title company becomes involved with a closing schedule, VitalChek is key to requesting and obtaining these older death certificates (often 5-10 years).

The panel members felt that Oregon does wonderful work that sets a great example for other states because of the accessibility to the people they serve.

*Q: What's going well with your Vital Records work?*

**R:** Panel members have been very happy since they started being able to order Vital Records via email, which changed everything for the better, especially the turnaround time. Before they could order via email, ordering had to be done by fax, which meant they had to go to

the office to do everything physically. They reported that it is much easier to look up Vital Records on OVERS, fill out the PDF form and email it along with their ID directly to agencies and that the turnaround time is has gone from 12 weeks to about 2-3 weeks at the most. Another recent change that has changed things for the better is being able to use the short form in the legal realm, with which the Funeral Homes do a great job of educating and guiding the clients through what can be a confusing process.

Panel members were pleased with the services and support they receive from Vital Records. For some, they receive reports from Vital Records that is integral to the functioning of their agencies. Panel members appreciate the prompt, responsive, and helpful services they receive whenever they need to reach out to Vital Records and reported that the Funeral Homes say they also appreciate the great customer service. Overall, they feel that all their interactions with Vital Records are seamless, easy, and positive.

Some additional context specific to the Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board (OMCB): Most of the funding for the OMCB, as an agency, comes from the death filing fee: With every death record the family pays for the decedents care and arrangements. Prior to 2022, this fee was \$20.00, which allocated \$6.00 to the IDP fund (Indigent Disposition Program fund) which reimburses the Funeral Homes who provide service for indigent or unclaimed decedents. (When no one claims the decedent because there are no family members, or the family acquiesces, or abandons the decedent). This is altruistic and unique to the state of the Oregon, that prevents these cases from falling through the cracks. The other \$14.00 goes to the OMCB agency for operations. which is a significant source of funding as they do not receive tax or lottery dollars, just the revenue from licensing and death filing fees

In 2022, the law changed and increased the death filing fee to \$30.00. The entirety of this increase goes to the IDP (now \$16.00 increased from \$6.00) and \$14.00 to goes to OMCB operations.

The OMCB works collaboratively with State Vital Records who provides the OMCB with a monthly report of the death certificates from Funeral Homes, which is the death filing free. Vital Records sends this data to the OMCB, who then invoices the Funeral Homes. The Funeral Home is a conduit to pass money through; the Funeral Home receives it and remits it to the OMCB. As they rely on these reports that are instrumental to their operations, the agency appreciates their excellent working relationship with the State Vital Records and their services.

***Q: What's challenging in your Vital Records work?***

**R:** The panel members stated that the amendments department is really needing help because they are so far behind. This backlog causes issues, especially in instances of guardianship and

adoption, because they must have the birth certificate amendment in order to proceed, which is a major challenge for the paralegals.

Panel members felt that while the process of VitalChek itself is easy, it could be improved. Some members reported that their clients often find it challenging to upload letters, documents, and photo ID. They also said that paying for expedited service in VitalChek makes it seem like they can check the status, but that the status isn't accurate because it isn't updated in real time, so they have to contact Vital Records to verify. Sometimes documents don't transfer correctly between VitalChek and Vital Records which causes delays.

Interacting with other states can be a major challenge for panel members due to the lack of uniformity in their requirements. While Oregon state employees appreciate the simplicity of being able to send in their government ID to prove need and authorization to order Vital Records, dealing with other state is more complex. Requirements vary, with some states accepting work IDs and driver's licenses, while others demand court orders which can take up to two weeks to process.

The panel members referred to earlier Work Group meetings that discussed the ongoing problem of not being able to get the medical certifiers to certify the death certificates, which causes major delays at a critical time. These delays place the Funeral Homes and directors in a difficult situation since they are the ones facing the families, so the pressure and blame often falls unfairly on them when they are not in a position to fix the situation. The Funeral Homes are taking the brunt of the emotions from customers who are experiencing this frustration on top of the traumatic loss of a loved one. They feel it is unfair to the Funeral Homes to carry the blame.

***Q: What's next for you in terms of Vital Records work?***

**R:** Panel members said that they would like to see a more seamless interface with VitalChek, to make it easier to get older records, to get everyone on OVERS, promote collaboration with Vital Records, and help everyone provide excellent customer service.

The panel members felt that their participation in the Work Group has been very enlightening as they have learned what others have experienced and they hope that this process will make it easier for everyone and are excited to see things moving forward and gaining momentum.

***Q: Could you explain more about how the process works with adoptions and needing an amended birth record?***

**R:** If it is determined that a birth record needs to be amended, for example, if there was a paternity test and it was discovered that there is a biological father who needs to be added

per court order to the vital record, it has to be done before the final court hearings, before the adoption can be finalized. These kinds of things can happen at the last moment, and then it can take months to get an amendment, especially when there are further complications involving the use of the correct form. Over the past year, there has been back and forth with Vital Records about the use of a specific form for amendments (old versus new) that has made it difficult to process things in a timely manner. In short, the amendment needs to be done before a final court hearing can be scheduled and this can push back the finalization of an adoption for months.

***Q: Can you say more about the challenges that Funeral Home directors face and what their expectations and hope are for Vital Records? What are the most common things you encounter?***

**R:** Sometimes they hear conversations and comments in various ways as one or more Funeral Home directors share their frustrations within the licensed community. In regard to the persistent issue with medical certifiers, they often hear Funeral Home Directors share stories about complicated situations, in which they have had to go in person to a doctor's office and wait for the doctor to show. Vital Records is aware of this problem and all involved are trying to find out what it will take to make this better with the variability of the willingness of medical examiners. This is the major challenge Funeral Home directors consistently face.

***Q: Regarding the fee increase for the IDP (Indigent Disposition Fund), did it work to provide enough funding?***

**R:** The fee increase was implemented because of a financial review done in 2020 that showed the IDP fund was underwater, so they worked with the finance department to make it sustainable. It was determined that the \$10 increase would keep the IDP going until 2025. It wasn't an issue of being underfunded; it was a proactive step to maintain the sustainability of the IDP fund as the rate of deaths increased.

***Q: In your interactions with different clients, have you noticed any barriers to access in terms of equity, if it is more difficult for certain groups to obtain records? For instance, any difficulties obtaining a 5–10-year-old death record or any other scenarios as far as equitable access?***

**R:** This is a legitimate concern because some clients are not as adept, or inclined to persevere, or have the resources to navigate this, so that is definitely an equity of access issue. While it may not necessarily be their role, the title companies don't help people navigate the system the way the Funeral Homes do. The title companies just say that they can't close until the client brings a death certificate, but they don't offer any guidance, so it can be intimidating and inaccessible which is an equity issue.

Sometimes when ordering records for children who are in the care of a government agency, barriers are encountered because vital records staff aren't aware of the requirements for

Tribal enrollment. Agencies provide a letter on letterhead explaining their need but may face questions about why they are ordering records for the child's parent/grandparent/great grandparent that they need to show Tribal lineage.

If a family abandons or acquiesces a decedent, sometimes they are still willing to pay for the death certificates, even if they can't or aren't willing to be the full contract price, but Funeral Home directors have big hearts for service and don't like to say no to anyone, so they haven't noted any equity issues.

Funeral Homes will bend over backwards to accommodate, they are very helpful. They do most of the ordering of the death certificates and navigate the process. The only time there seems to be a barrier is with older people who are confused by the VitalChek process, but the Funeral Homes will provide them with printed forms when people aren't comfortable or familiar with using electronic systems.