

Vital Statistics Registration Districts

The maintenance and issuance of birth and death certificates is currently the responsibility of 1,452 different entities in the state. There are only about 6,400 vital statistics registration districts in the rest of the United States, and thus New York comprises nearly a quarter of the districts nationwide.

NYS Public Health Law establishes that each city, village and town constitutes a vital statistics registration district and must register and maintain records related to all births and deaths within its jurisdiction. (State hospitals and charitable or penal institutions may also serve as registration districts.) The commissioner may consolidate districts at the county level with the approval of the board of supervisors of the county, which has occurred in Onondaga, Tompkins, Monroe and Chemung Counties.

Cities, towns and villages that conduct this function may charge up to \$10 per certificate they issue. In a typical death, 6 to 10 copies might be requested of the death certificate. The counties that have consolidated districts may charge up to \$30 per certificate, and as much as \$45 if the service is expedited.

The advantage of county level administration of vital statistics is that it ensures consistent administration, streamlines service provision, and makes it easier for the federal and state governments to disseminate information to the districts. A consolidated function is also likely to lead to electronic databases that can be useful to genealogists, benefits administrators, and law enforcement.

When this service is provided by so many different municipal entities it is much more difficult to standardize procedures, aggregate data, and protect documents which can be used to establish citizenship or develop false identities. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 seeks to standardize the documents and processes used to create and verify identity, and is prescriptive of several procedures performed in the creation and use of vital records. It mandates minimum standards for birth certificates, requires states to be able to respond in real time to requests for verification of vital events (e.g. births or deaths), and specifies a wide range of security measures regarding the issuance and storage of vital records. Draft regulations establishing specific security requirements are expected this spring.

The NYS Department of Health has developed a program bill this year which would allow the Commissioner to consolidate at county level, without county legislative approval, the function of local registrars of vital statistics. This makes sense from an efficiency perspective and in the interest of national security.

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