

Testimony in Support of SB168: Public Health - Maryland Suicide Fatality Review Committee

Dear Madame Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kristen Harbeson and I have come before you in the past to testify from my professional capacity as a public interest advocate. It is from my personal capacity that I draft this testimony today. Because the legislation being considered is profoundly personal to me. I am deeply grateful to the sponsor for her leadership on this important issue.

I hope that no one on this committee has ever had to feel the pain of losing a loved one to suicide, although I am sure that you have. I have had to do so five times over the past 11 years, most recently just over a year ago. While death is an important part of life, and each death brings its own unique grief, to know that a loved one has chosen to make this most permanent and painful decision adds a level to the grief. It changes the direction of the questioning from a universal "why" to very specific ones. Why did she do it? And could I have done something to stop it? As the widow of my closest friend noted after we lost her husband to his own hand: Suicide makes everyone a detective. This bill recognizes that the answer to those questions is of a societal importance, not simply a personal one. We all are lessened by every death.

One friend was a gifted leader - funny, complicated, passionate. And he was diagnosed with a brain tumor that contributed to his depression.

One friend was a brilliant artist, who carried with her an air of impending mischief and possibility into every room she was in. She was also facing a divorce without means of self-support, and her depression raged her to addiction.

One friend was a caring father, a gifted storyteller, an extraordinarily creative cook, and a rock to his family and his friends. He struggled with financial challenges which caused him to feel an overwhelming hopelessness without a way out.

Each of these were Marylanders who touched the lives of their communities in profound ways, and their stories are unique, but not unusual. The loss of each is a tragedy, and those of us touched by them continue - one year - seven years - eleven years later - to be haunted by their deaths and the questions.. And each of these, in their own years, were one of hundreds of Marylanders who left behind loved ones whose lives were shattered.

I implore you, most urgently, to pass this important bill, so that lives can be saved - the lives of those who would die by suicide, and those who will be left behind.

Sincerely,
Kristen Harbeson

Baltimore City