

January 22, 2021

Testimony in Support of HB209: 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 never fully answered.. 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