

January 26, 2022

SUPPORT: HB48: Public Health - Maryland Suicide Fatality Review Committee

Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kristen Harbeson and for the last six years I have come before you to testify from my professional capacity as a public interest advocate. Today, my testimony is as a woman whose life has been shattered by suicide.

For me, this bill is a matter of numbers.

- **5** - five times someone in my life has taken their own. The husband of a close friend at whose wedding I spoke. A colleague who played a critical role in my professional development. A college room-mate who took her life three days before her best friend's wedding. A close friend who I didn't know was calling to say goodbye forever when I thought she had called to say she was going on vacation. My close friend whose search I helped to coordinate for over three horrible days in early January, 2020, before his body was found in the woods. It is this number that gives me the gruesome standing for this testimony.
- **650** - the average number of Marylanders who kill themselves every year, including during the year since this committee passed this bill in 2021.
- **9500**- representing the fifteen people closest to those 650: the spouses, parents, siblings, children, and best friends. The people who were closest with those 650, and will spend the rest of their lives wondering what they could have done differently as they adjust to the permanent, aching maw of grief left by the death of their loved one. This number may include the teacher, boss, doctor, religious leader, who have some level of responsibility and care of those 650, and who will be rubbed raw with guilt and self-doubt that there was something that they could have done or seen. More than 650 individuals, I urge you to think of it as impacting the entire town of Frostburg. Or Fort Meade, or Lansdowne, or Bladensburg, or Mt. Airy, or Ocean City. Every year, a different town.
- **95,000** - representing the extended circle of each of those people: the wider circle of friends and families, the neighbors, coworkers, classmates, fellow congregants. All of the people who will always have a moth eaten hole in the fabric of their lives, which may mend in time, but will never be the same.

The most important number, though is 1. The one family friend who I was able to reach out to with potentially life-saving information because I saw warning signs in a facebook post about wanting to re-home her dogs. I knew that this was a warning sign for suicide, especially since I knew she was struggling with depression and health concerns, as well as the impending anniversary of her husband's death from cancer. An urgent message to the Virginia Suicide

Prevention Officer directed me to resources in her area, as well as suggested language to help guide a difficult conversation. I will never know whether my message prevented her from taking her own life, but I know that I was able to take action that I wasn't able to for any of the five.

The most important part of this story, however, is that the reason that I knew to recognize these warning signs is because of Suicide Fatality Review Committees in other states, who have collected information that identified some of the behavioral warning signs, like re-homing pets, that could allow for intervention before suicide.

Suicide Fatality Review Committees save lives.

I am deeply grateful for this Committee and the Maryland Senate for passing the bill introduced in 2021, and for Delegate Belcastro for her tireless leadership on this issue. I ask you, most urgently, for a favorable report.

With gratitude,
Kristen Harbeson

Baltimore, Maryland