

Testimony for Maryland House of Delegates
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**HB0969: The Katherine Morris Death Reclassification Act
In Favor with acceptance of amendments**

Sherri Warren
8843 Greenbelt Road, #160
Greenbelt, MD 20770

I urge you to pass **HB0969: The Katherine Morris Death Reclassification Act** with full acceptance of its amendments. This bill was created in response to the mishandling of the case of the tragic death of Katherine Morris. With the passing of HB0969, FOR the purpose of requiring a law enforcement agency or related department in response to the medical examiner or the Secretary of Health changing or correcting the cause or manner of death recorded on the death certificate of a deceased individual in accordance with a provision of law, and allow for the continued closing of ambiguities.

With certain appeals/cases to the manner of death heard by an administrative law judge that have successfully changed the manner of death to unsolved. The passing of HB0969 will open the door for the involvement of a future law enforcement administration or agency who will provide more of a vigilant approach to solve a case. As opposed to having the police department re-investigate which would not be handled in the same manner. Also, with the requirement of the involvement from the assistant state's attorney there will be reassurance that the cases are handled properly and orderly.

In 1986, my brother a nineteen year old black man named Keith Warren was found strung up on a tree in Montgomery County, Maryland. His death was ruled a suicide. Pictures from the death scene say otherwise. The first responder believed otherwise. At the time of his death, my mother Mary Couey was not given an exact time, date, or cause of death. There was no autopsy. Police (a Detective Beasley), released his body directly to a funeral home of Detective Beasley choice. From 1986-1999 it was explained to my mother by the then Chief of Police Bernard Crooke, Chief Donald Brooks, Chief Edwards and also echoed by Chief Manger and Cheif Jones in 2014, 2016, and 2018 that in 1986 the police had the authority to send bodies to the funeral homes of their choice prior to notification of the next of kin and ordering no autopsy. In 2018, I requested under the MPIA /FOIA proof of this procedure and the policy manual from the Montgomery County Police Dept. and was told that there is no existing copy, electronic or hard available to confirm that this was true. In addition, my mother was informed of my brother 's death six hours after he was found and his body released to a funeral home . Again, no autopsy was ordered, and there was no investigation once the body was released from the scene. Subsequently, over the next six months after my brother's body was found questionable actions continued to be taken by the police

department. It was confirmed that the coroner never came to the scene, and there are conflicting dates on the death certificate, police report and the medical examiner's report. Detective Beasley (lead at the death scene) cut the tree down one month after we buried Keith claiming he was collecting evidence. However, if the case was closed the day Keith's body was found, why was he collecting evidence one month after we buried him? In 1986, there was nothing medical, scientific or factual to back up the claim from the police department, or the medical examiner that my brother's death was a suicide. For twenty-three years my mom fought for justice and accountability to find out what happened to my brother and how he ended up hanging from a tree. Tragically she died in 2009, with these and other unanswered questions remaining about the handling of death of my brother Keith Warren, in the midst of racial tension around our country, and the FBI, themselves issuing a bulletin warning of the infiltration of white nationalist into police departments across the country. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/white-supremacist-links-law-enforcement-are-urgent-concern> Thirty-seven years later I am continuing my mom's fight for some sense of justice in Keith Warren's death as well as to bring a voice to her struggle and to others who struggle to understand the unintended roadblocks that deter their access to truth. In hindsight, it's possibly that if my mother had the extended grace period to challenge the ruling on Keith's death certificate in 1986, she would not have suffered the remaining twenty-three years of her life looking for answers as to how her only son ended up hanging from a tree. Families in the midst of grief, suspecting the mishandling of a loved one's death, cannot reasonably be expected to be able to know and prove their allegation in 60 days.

HB0969 will ensure that there is transparency and accountability when making a decision on the manner of death and changes to it. This bill will grant peace of mind to persons of interest to get clarification of details about the death of their loved ones. Otherwise, many people will be left with ambiguity similar to what Ms. Morris experienced. If this bill is passed, families will not have to face the same battle that Ms. Morris had to face because there will be a law to protect them and their loved one's. I urge you to pass HB0969, honor the story of Kathy Morris and her mother's journey for justice, give hope to families who have experienced the same kind of injustice, and prevent stories of this happening ever again.

Thank you.

Sherri Warren