

Testimony for Maryland House of Delegates
February 26, 2024

**HB0969: Death Certificates - Cause or Manner of Death Determinations - Requirements
After Change or Correction.**

In Favor

Jen Roman
847 Harvest Moon Dr
Odenton, MD 21113
District 33A

I urge you to pass HB0969 in its entirety.

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 the passing of this bill, families will not have to face the same battle and stonewalling that Ms. Morris and her family have had to face.

I urge you to pass HB0969, *The Katherine Morris Death Reclassification Act*, honoring the story of Katherine Sarah Morris and her mother's journey for justice, giving hope to families who have experienced the same kind of injustice, and prevent stories like this from happening again.

Thank you.

Background notes about why this bill is needed – please do not include this, but you may put this in your own words

This bill was created in response to the mishandling of the death investigation of Katherine Sarah Morris (Kathy). She was a young black woman that was found deceased in her car at Arundel Mills mall, just weeks before graduating from University of Maryland. Her cause of death was carbon monoxide toxicity from charcoal grills lit in her car. Records show that she was a victim of marital fraud and had a \$100,000 life insurance policy on her life with no suicide clause. Records also show that an inexperienced police officer googled what appeared to be the cause of death car side, while Kathy's body was still in the car. It allegedly came back a method of suicide

or murder. He opted to choose suicide.

Police are alleged (from the expert testimony of a senior law enforcement officer) to have made an abundance of investigative errors leading to the mishandling of the death investigation, and then subsequently trying to cover those errors. One of the first was referring to the case at the scene as suicide and thereafter not properly processing the scene as a possible homicide scene. They closed the investigation within forty eight hours labeling it a suicide. The medical examiner referred to the case at the scene as a suicide, only doing a partial autopsy. Dr. David Fowler's (who is now classified as a highly incompetent medical examiner, following his testimony during the death of George Floyd trial), immediately ruled the death a suicide supported by the police narrative, without any real investigation.

Her mother Marguerite Morris and experts from around the county worked tirelessly for over a decade pointing bringing out numerous inconsistencies and unanswered questions related to Kathy's death. After a decade, the family was granted of an administrative hearing. As a result a judge ruled in the family's favor and Kathy's death certificate was changed from suicide to undetermined. It now reads they do not know when she died or by what manner.

With that change the family requested the death be listed as unsolved to allow other law enforcement to eventually pursue more information or address the multitude of inconsistencies identified in the case. The judge issued a 58-page opinion with the noted expectation that police would eventually pursue more information.

However, when approached in 2022, police refused to list the case as unsolved which would allow future law enforcement agencies, or possibly encourage additional witnesses to come forth. The chief of police amid a myriad of conflicts of interest refused, now stating that the Katherine Morris' case had been administratively closed in 2012. Leaving the family, shocked, hurt and dismayed, with no additional answers, and disregarding the judges noted expectation.

This unjust outcome revealed that there was a need for independent oversight to oversee the affairs of changing the manner of death reclassifications.