

Chairman Bagnall and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am here in strong support of HB1523.

My name is Sharon Baharoff. I am the mother of Robert Baharoff. At 12:22 p.m. on January 5th of this year our 23-year-old son was pronounced dead with no obvious cause. On February 10th, we learned why: mitragynine poisoning — also known as kratom, 7-oh, gas station heroin and many others.

There were no illegal substances in Robert's system. No heroin. No fentanyl. No cocaine. The substance that took his life was legally sold.

Kratom is marketed as a natural supplement that promotes energy, focus, and improved mood. Many believe that because it is natural, it is safe. It is not. Kratom acts on opioid receptors in the brain and carries significant risk for addiction and death. Consumers are unaware of the deleterious effects of kratom. Parents are not informed. Anyone can purchase it easily.

Warning labels are not enough and will only protect manufacturers from "wrongful death" lawsuits. Access is the problem. Availability is the problem. Legality is the problem.

It is difficult to find accurate statistics on kratom deaths because they are often combined with other opioid deaths. Federal agencies including the NIH, CDC, and FDA recognize kratom as harmful and potentially deadly.

Robert's life mattered. He was so much more than a statistic. If sharing Robert's story can help move this bill forward and spare even one family from this devastation, then I will continue to speak.

I urge you to pass HB1523, the effort to criminalize the sale and distribution of kratom in Maryland, joining several states and many other countries. This legislation represents a necessary step toward preventing further deaths and protecting families from a product that poses serious public health risks and help ensure other families are spared from this devastation.

Thank you for your willingness to address this issue and standing firm in protecting Maryland families.