

Written submittal, January 22, 2024

I want to thank Marcus Simon for being the patron of HB81. It is the 11th year of this quest to bring mental health program reform into conformity with the abolition of a barbaric common law originating in England in the 1300's. Almost sixty-five years ago, England and most commonwealth countries abolished suicide as a common law crime. This year Pakistan, Ghana, Guyana, and Malaysia have done so. ([Theguardian.com: Its-a-huge-sign-of-progress-the-battle-to-decriminalise-suicide](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/22/suicide-decriminalization)) Maryland did it in one legislative session three years ago.

Decriminalization of the common law crime of suicide should be a priority of Virginia's mental health program reform. Although on the books, many waive it off, saying this common law is not enforced; that is only half right. Yes, one no longer goes to jail for attempted suicide or, if one dies by suicide, the body is no longer dragged to an intersection, impaled, and the property of the deceased no longer confiscated for the crown. Yet, by maintaining this law on the books, families are stunned that their loved one is labeled a common law criminal and that their legislature fails in altruism, year after year, in not removing this arcane law. Each delegate has a responsibility to the families and to the deceased to take action now, altruistically, to pass HB81.

To those who have said abolishing this law will "open the floodgates to suicide," I want you to know that the National Institutes of Health, Gates Foundation, and many international organizations have found this to be untrue. Some may think my daughter, who died by suicide, is in hell. That decision is, at the very least, presumptuous, even to the point of being sacrilegious. My daughter, in her life, was kind and compassionate, believed in the equality of all, and based her life on the basic principles of the of the God worshipped by many who condemn her to hell.

Further, this issue has nothing to do with assisted suicide, and never has. Some have tried to link the two. Abolishing suicide as a common law crime involves erasure of stigma, nothing else. It does not change at all existing laws related to assisted suicide.

My daughter was an emergency medical technician (EMT), which brings me to the next issue. In 2021, four police officers who defended the US Capitol on January 6th subsequently took their own lives. Two DC Metropolitan Police officers and two Capitol Police officers, all residents of Virginia, were posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their valor by President Biden. Yet, as Virginia residents, until the common law crime of suicide is abolished, they are technically common law criminals. Please, any of you opposing HB81, go home to go home and tell your constituents, including those who are first responders and military, how you voted on this issue. And I ask you to start the conversation with: "I thank your lost loved ones for their service to their country and our community, BUT..." Transparency.

In 2021, when this issue came up before the Senate Judiciary, three of the largest suicide prevention organizations in the United States: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and the military Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) all supported the decriminalization of the

suicide common law crime, (HB1951). In spite of these organizations sending extensive letters of support for HB1951 to the Virginia Senate Judiciary, it failed to pass. (It had passed in the House, thanks to bipartisan support.)

This year, I hope things will be different. I hope suicide is recognized and treated like the major health crisis it is. Just as diabetes or a heart attack is not a common law crime, nor should severe depression resulting in suicide be considered a common law crime. Nor should this anachronistic and once brutal common law stand as an impediment to those seeking help. Nor should mental health program reform be implemented without taking the common law crime of suicide off the books once and for all. Without doing so, it is not true mental health program reform.

And, it is my hope that the legislators of Virginia will be as enlightened as those of Pakistan, and as altruistic as those of Maryland, where both believe that suicide is not a crime.

Please vote for the passage of HB81.

With HB81, one is neither a Republican nor a Democrat; one is a compassionate and empathetic human being. Not one of us, whether in the legislature or elsewhere, has been spared the effects of the suicide or mental illness of a spouse, child, relative, friend, or neighbor.

Please vote YES to HB81 to help the healing of our families, our friends, our community, and ourselves.

With all my best, and with the hope that HB81 passes, as it should, with bipartisan support,

Sharon Webster
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