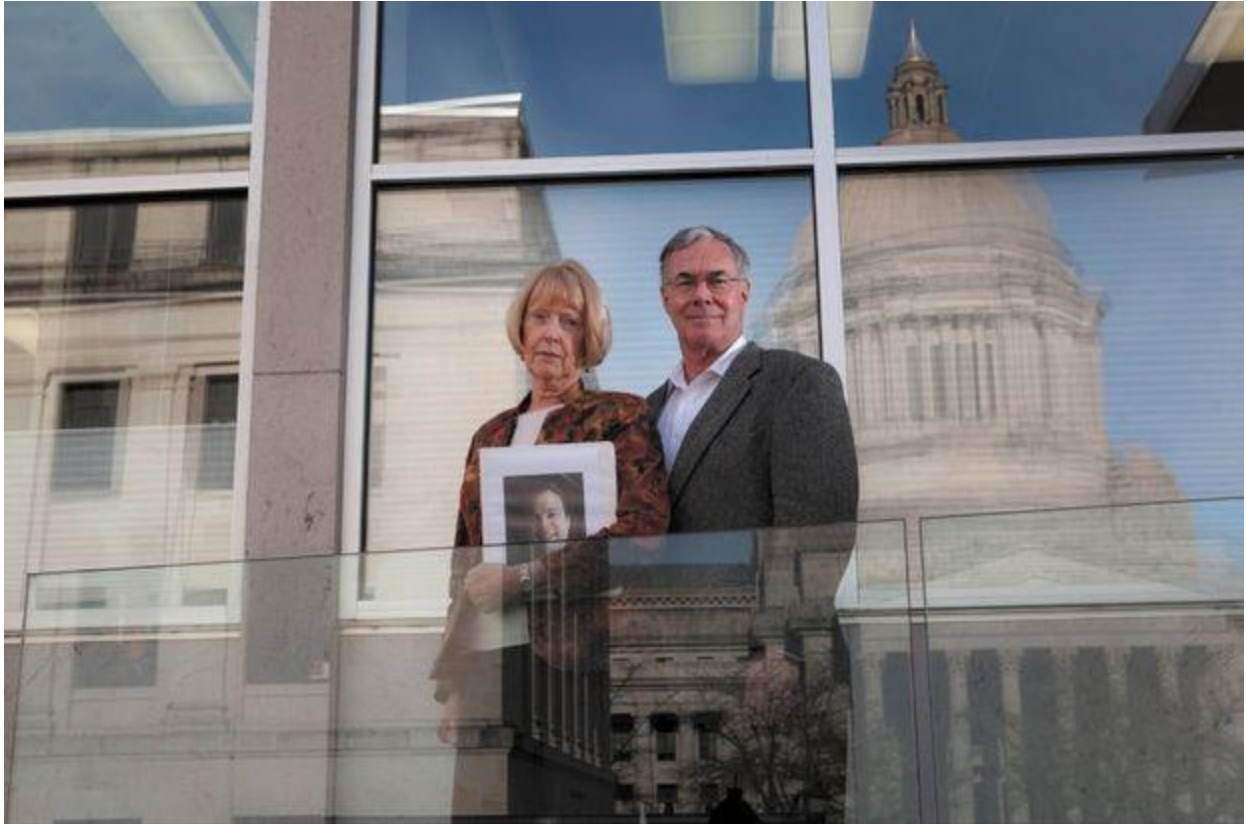


# After tragedy, parents seek stronger commitment laws

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Doug and Nancy Reuter, parents of Joel Reuter, a 28-year-old mentally ill man killed by police last summer in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, have come to Olympia from their home in Texas to campaign for more involuntary treatment of mental illness. BETTINA HANSEN/THE SEATTLE TIMES

At some point, during one of dozens of unsuccessful pleas to Seattle officials, Doug Reuter remembers asking what it would take to get his mentally ill son detained for treatment.

Reuter, who was living in Texas and unfamiliar with Washington state's narrow involuntary-commitment law, was stunned by the answer.

"If he had a loaded gun in his hand with his finger on the trigger, we could get him some help," Reuter says he was told.

“And that’s exactly what Joel had on the morning of July 5,” the father continues. “And the help they gave was to shoot and kill him.”

Joel Reuter, a 28-year-old software engineer with bipolar disorder, was killed by police in July after firing near officers from the balcony of his Capitol Hill condo.

He thought he was shooting at zombies.

Six months later, his parents have moved from Dallas to Olympia to lobby the Legislature to make it easier to commit mentally ill people.

Specifically, Doug and Nancy Reuter want Washington to adopt Arizona’s system, which they say twice saved their son’s life when he attended college there.

The parents are working with an unnamed House Democrat and Senate Republican to introduce a bill this week that would add “persistently or acutely disabled” to the list of conditions that could trigger an involuntary commitment.

Currently in Washington, a person must be “gravely disabled” or in imminent danger of harming self or others.

The bill would allow residents to petition to have a family member committed and would mandate more monitoring after the commitments end.

The changes would mark a major shift for a state that has traditionally prized civil liberties in the involuntary-commitment balance between rights and security.

While Washington’s “imminent danger” standard matches many other states — Arizona’s definition is broader than average — Washington is one of five states that does not allow residents to petition a court for a family member to be committed, according to the Virginia-based Treatment Advocacy Center.

Washington is also one of a minority that requires commitments be ordered by a county official, rather than by any psychiatrist, according to the national group.

Doug and Nancy Reuter are far from the first parents to advocate for stronger laws. Their push will be an uphill battle.

Beyond the liberty concerns, expanding Washington’s commitment laws would require the state to spend millions of dollars more on court proceedings, commitments and monitoring at a time of tight budgets.

The Reuters bring an unusually strong skill set to the fight: Doug, 64, served in Minnesota’s state House in the late 1990s, and Nancy is a retired administrative assistant with a talent for organizing.

## EARLY LOVE OF COMPUTERS

The first hint of their son's mental illness came during his freshman year at University of Arizona in 2004.

That spring, Joel started sending his parents increasingly strange instant messages. At one point, he accused them of brainwashing him with a speed-reading machine.

Doug and Nancy, who had retired to Austin, flew to Tucson.

Eventually, they used Arizona's petition process to ask for their son to be committed. A panel of psychiatrists and a court agreed.

Joel was hospitalized for just two weeks, but for the next year was monitored to ensure he attended appointments and took his medications.

Under Arizona law, the monitoring was so strict that officials could force him to take a blood test to prove he was taking his meds.

"That's what saved his life," Nancy says.

The process could not happen that way here. In Washington, family members cannot file such petitions. Initial commitments must be ordered by a county mental-health worker. Even longer, court-ordered commitments typically last 14 days. There is no follow-up monitoring.

Jane Beyer, head of mental-health services for the state Department of Social and Health Services, says the state must reconcile many factors when deciding whether to commit people who have done nothing wrong.

As for Doug's assertion about the commitment criteria essentially requiring a loaded gun, Beyer will say only that "Each individual's situation is unique."

Amnon Shoenfeld, a top official at King County's mental-health division, declines to comment altogether.

Shankar Narayan, an American Civil Liberties Union lobbyist, argues to keep the current criteria.

"We should be very careful about changing that balance, particularly on the basis of a set of emotional facts," Narayan says.

But to Doug, "When you go so far down the hill that you don't even know who you are, you have no more civil liberties."

The Reuters prefer Arizona's model.

They were so confident in that state's system, in fact, that when Joel had a second psychotic episode in November 2006, they agreed to fax in the commitment petition.

"The first time, it was the hardest thing we've ever done in our lives," Nancy says. "The second time, it was 'Where do we sign?'"

Joel was hospitalized for seven weeks but eventually stabilized, got back on his medication and graduated from college.

## **FINDING HIS "DREAM JOB"**

Joel moved to Seattle in 2008, landing what he described as his "dream job" at a company creating software applications for Apple products.

For five years, Joel lived without significant mental-health problems. Then, last January, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. He started chemotherapy but began pulling away from his family and friends.

On a trip to Seattle in March, Doug and Nancy suspected he was not taking his psychiatric medication.

Over the next two months, the parents documented 48 calls seeking help from authorities as Joel took an impulsive trip to London, attempted suicide, and crashed a BMW at 140 miles per hour on Interstate 5.

Seattle Police Department records indicate its Crisis Intervention Team visited Joel's condo seven times.

He was briefly hospitalized after the suicide attempt and the car crash. But the common refrain from authorities, his parents say, was their son "didn't meet the criteria" for a commitment.

When Joel was finally committed at Harborview Medical Center in May, he stayed three and a half weeks before getting released without monitoring.

Officials wanted to mandate outpatient treatment, according to Doug and Nancy, but no psychiatrist wanted to participate in the unrequired program.

"That's when I knew Joel was going to die," says Nancy, pointing to a package of unused pills her son was supposed to be taking after leaving Harborview.

Twenty-five days later, Joel found himself in a standoff with police.

By then, he had stopped talking to his parents and, somehow, obtained a 9-mm Glock handgun despite not being allowed to own a firearm. Police told Reuters that Joel purchased the gun in a sale that did not require a background check.

The standoff began just after 3 a.m., after neighbors reported hearing gunshots.

Police knocked on the door to Joel's fifth-floor condo. He threatened to shoot anyone who entered, according to records. For hours, officers tried to negotiate. At around 10:30 a.m., Joel went to the balcony and fired a lone shot. Snipers returned fire.

Friday, an inquest jury ruled the officers had reason to believe Joel posed an imminent threat.

The Reuters do not blame Seattle police. But Doug is convinced that if Washington had Arizona's law, "Joel would be alive today and back at work."

## **AN URGENCY TO THEIR MISSION**

In Olympia, the couple is staying with the sister-in-law of Nancy's sister. The parent-lobbyists do not plan to stay in their son's adopted state for long.

When their bill runs its course, Doug and Nancy say they will pack up their Toyota sedan and drive to Minnesota to lobby that state to adopt the same law.

Minnesota's legislative session starts Feb. 25. The parents figure Doug should have influence with his former colleagues.

And when that session ends, the couple plans to return to Dallas.

"This is not a job that we're coming back for next year," Doug says.

Why end the fight so quickly?

The father, who from the other side saw parents with similar stories come and go, does not hesitate.

"By next year, everybody will forget that Joel lived and died here," Doug says. "If we can't get changes this year, we won't get anything."