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Some mental-health officials oppose commitment bill

Parents of a 28-year-old man fatally shot by Seattle police last summer testified for a bill to make it easier to commit a relative for mental-health treatment in Washington. They encountered opposition from an unexpected quarter.

By [Brian M. Rosenthal](#), Seattle Times Olympia bureau

When Doug and Nancy Reuter started lobbying for a bill to help parents get their mentally ill children involuntarily committed, they expected opposition from civil libertarians and spending-weary conservatives.

They didn't foresee heavy resistance from some parts of the mental-health community itself.

The Reuters, parents of a 28-year-old man fatally shot by police on the balcony of his Capitol Hill condo last summer, received a long-awaited audience in Olympia on Monday, testifying at hearings on their bill in both the state House and Senate.

The proposal, numbered 2725 in the House and 6513 in the Senate, would create a new appeal process for when county officials decline to order an involuntary commitment. In those situations, immediate family members could ask a Superior Court judge about the case.

It's a scaled-back version of an idea the Reuters have been pushing for weeks.

The couple, who live in Texas but have moved to Olympia to lobby for the bill, say they tried to get their son Joel Reuter committed for treatment for weeks before he was killed, but were stymied by Washington's narrow involuntary-commitment law.

"You can't begin to understand our frustration and dread as our bright, loving son was denied treatment again and again," Nancy Reuter told the Senate Human Services and Corrections Committee.

The back-to-back morning hearings featured plenty of support from lawmakers and a steady stream of parents urging passage of the proposal.

But some advocates expressed concerns that the changes would put more stress on an overwhelmed and underfunded mental-health system — especially because the law is already set to change in July to make it somewhat easier to commit citizens.

“Unless you address (the system’s lack of funding), you’re not going to solve anything with this bill,” said David Lord, of the advocacy group Disability Rights Washington, noting the proposal does not include more resources for the beleaguered system.

Mike De Felice, the top public defender in King County’s Involuntary Treatment Act court, said the bureaucracy in the proposed new system would make mental-health workers spend more time on paperwork and in court.

“Those two factors are going to take (county designated mental-health professionals) off the street,” De Felice said. “That doesn’t help anyone.”

The opposition triggered tension, especially in the House Judiciary Committee.

“I got to tell you, I’m shocked that we’ve got advocates of mental-health organizations here opposing this bill that would make it easier to get those in need of treatment into treatment,” state Rep. Jay Rodne, R-North Bend, said at one point to applause from the crowd. “I mean, I expected that from the criminal-defense bar, but from the mental-health professionals — I am shocked.”

The Reuters said afterward that they expected some pushback, mostly from civil libertarians. Nancy Reuter said she was surprised the American Civil Liberties Union did not attend either hearing.

Doug Reuter said he, too, was surprised at the level of resistance. But he said he didn’t think anybody “really had any solid, reasonable arguments” against the proposal, adding that the lawmakers seemed supportive.

During the hearing, friends and family of Joel Reuter’s countered with emotional testimony. A panel of three friends described how much they loved him, and how frustrated they were with the system.

If the bill had been in place a year earlier, one said, “we would still be having singalongs with our teddy bear on Saturdays.”

It is unclear when either committee will vote on the proposals.

They are sponsored by the Legislature’s two health-care committee chairwomen, Rep. Eileen Cody, D-Seattle, and Sen. Randi Becker, R-Enumclaw.

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