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## Bill to reconsider involuntary commitment

By Christopher Lopaze | Feb 19, 2014

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**WNPA OLYMPIA NEWS BUREAU** — OLYMPIA--Joel Reuter, 28, was shot and killed in a standoff with Seattle police July 5 after he fired a gun at police from his Capitol Hill apartment's balcony, earlier telling a 911 operator "zombie police officers" were outside.

Reuter had a history of mental illness since he was a college sophomore, but did not qualify for involuntary commitment under Washington's Involuntary Treatment Act.

His parents, Doug and Nancy Reuter, had tried unsuccessfully to get him detained for evaluation. The Reuters, who live in Texas, are in Olympia advocating for a bill to change the law.

Currently under Washington law, a person has to pose a "likelihood of serious harm" or be "gravely disabled" to meet the criteria for involuntary detention, a standard similar to laws in most states.

[House Bill 2725](#) would allow family members to ask the superior court to review involuntary-detention decisions made by designated mental-health professionals.

The court could order an initial detention of up to 72 hours for evaluation and treatment if it finds probable cause. Judges would have to apply the same legal standard as health-care professionals.

"Joel's tragic death was easily preventable," Nancy Reuter said in testimony at the House Appropriations Committee on Feb.10.

She said passing the bill would help the government avoid costly law-enforcement interventions, and "give family members some much needed hope, and another chance to get their loved one the help they desperately need."

In previous hearings this legislative session, opponents said mental-health professionals conduct fair investigations, and then make decisions based on the law.

The bill would require mental-health professionals to provide the court with written documents explaining their decision within 24 hours of a petition by family members. The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington also opposes HB 2725.

The state already passed a law that takes effect this coming July 1, permitting health-care professionals considering involuntary commitment to take into account statements by credible witnesses, including family members, as well as recent records, such as previous commitments and history of violent behavior.

Gregory Robinson, senior policy analyst for the Washington Community Mental Health Council, an association of licensed mental-health centers in the state, said in an interview that he understands family members' frustrations, but the new criteria to take effect in July responds to concerns of family members who feel they are being ignored.

Robinson said the focus should instead be on providing adequate training on the new criteria so they are successfully implemented, otherwise "it would be a broken promise to the families."

He said the Legislature should wait to see the effects of the new criteria before taking further action.

Seth Dawson from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a national organization advocating for the mentally ill, testified at the House Appropriations committee that more family involvement is important. He said he supports the bill, but that it won't resolve the issue.

He said lowering the criteria from "gravely disabled" to "persistently and acutely disabled" would be a more effective measure to prevent future deaths.

An accurate estimate of costs associated with the proposed law is difficult to make because it would depend on the future actions of both family members and the rulings.

The fiscal analysis attached to the bill estimates the courts would have to spend greater than \$50,000 per year to handle paperwork and superior court hearings for petitions.

Three 16-bed Evaluation and Treatment facilities would be required to meet the expected growth in the need for beds, according to the fiscal analysis. Each facility would cost \$5 million to build, and \$9 million per year to operate.

Rep. Eileen Cody, D-West Seattle, the prime sponsor of the bill, said it's important to consider the cost of not acting.

"You can't put a price on the life of someone like Joel Reuter," she said. Cody said she is optimistic about the bill's chances for final passage.

On Feb. 11, the House Appropriations committee approved the measure and sent it to the Rules Committee.

The Rules Committee will decide whether to schedule it to be read on the House floor, where members can amend it, before it could proceed to a final vote.

A companion Senate bill has been referred to the Senate Ways and Means, but it hasn't been scheduled for consideration.

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