

February 3, 2026

Letter of Support for SB 1550 – Identifying Hidden Homicides

To: Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

On behalf of Alliance for HOPE International, we strongly support and urge you to pass SB1550. Your leadership and sense of urgency for Identifying Hidden Homicides gives us HOPE. We extend our gratitude to Senator Sara Gelser Blouin for introducing SB1550 and all those who have quickly signed on as co-authors. We are particularly inspired by Kellee Harris, Shellie and Bob Stager for the courage and determination to seek justice for their daughters.

Casey Gwinn and I helped California Senator Angelique Ashby and Senator Susan Rubio pass SB989, on behalf of Joanna, Joanna's family and the Sacramento Family Justice Center. SB989 became effective January 1, 2025 with unanimous bi-partisan support. As former prosecutors, we launched Alliance for HOPE International (Alliance) to assist victims of violent crimes and prevent homicides through our work in developing Family Justice Centers, Camp HOPE America, VOICES (network of survivors), the Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention, Domestic Shelters.org (which provides on-line resources to millions of victims and professionals) and most recently the Justice Project. Homicide prevention is our calling. Never in our wildest imagination did we realize we would NEED to dedicate the remainder of our careers to also raising awareness about Hidden Homicides and launch the Justice Project.

A Hidden Homicide occurs when a perpetrator kills his partner and then stages the scene to look like a suicide or an accident, avoiding accountability for murder. Crime scene staging research has found that most offenders who stage crime scenes are male, most victims are female, and the most common victim-offender relationship involving staging is intimate partner relationships. The most common murder to be staged is strangulation which is then made to look like a suicide by hanging (Geberth, 1996; Ferguson and Brooks, 2025).

Joanna's Law was passed to honor Joanna Hunter who died at the early age of 36 in October 2011 and make important legal and landmark changes in California. Within 30 minutes, after responding to a 911 call concerning Joanna's death, investigators quickly concluded she died by suicide. Yet, there was no internal autopsy, no family interviews, no records check for prior domestic violence, no suicide assessment, no lethality assessment despite a long document history of domestic violence, motive and opportunity. Because the scene was staged to look like suicide, it was presumed to be a suicide. The case was closed and remains closed to this day.

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Despite the family begging for Joanna's case to be immediately reopened, they were ignored. Even when the Alliance intervened on behalf of the family, almost 4 years ago, we were equally met with resistance and limited access to records. But it didn't take us long to realize that the laws in California were inadequate for family members in suspicious and/or misclassified death cases. To our surprise, we even realized that California law did not treat a suicide with a history of domestic violence as a suspicious death, despite the research. Nor did California provide training on staged crime scenes to law enforcement professionals who conduct death investigations.

Furthermore, family members of a suspicious or a misclassified death have no place to go for assistance. They are not viewed as family members of a homicide case. They are viewed as family members of a suicide victim who simply cannot accept the fact their loved one died by suicide. In fact, in most states, family members have no statutory right to appeal the decision of a Medical Examiner or Coroner to an independent review board or court. From our research, it appears only five states even allow family members the statutory right to appeal the cause and manner of death to a court: Indiana, Maryland, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. However, in the state of Washington, the Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office has posted its policy on how to receive, evaluate and make decisions on complaints and appeals. We salute Spokane's transparency and recognition for a family's need for due process and the right to be heard. They are a model.

Fortunately, Joanna's Law now gives HOPE to family members. Family members in suspicious death cases now have access to records including autopsy photos; the right to be notified they can request an autopsy. SB989 recognizes a suicide with a history of domestic violence as a presumptive suspicious death case; Identifies the Ten Factors of a suspicious death, with 3 factors triggering an investigation and a full autopsy. SB989 also encourages training, an independent review and, best of all, it provides important legislative intent.

California's Legislative Intent includes four important points:

- Suspicious death cases, where there is a history of being victimized by domestic violence, are inadequately investigated at times, when a premature decision is made to determine the cause of death as suicide even before a comprehensive investigation has been completed by law enforcement professionals.
- Domestic violence-related homicides are highly susceptible to staging or alteration of the death scene before investigators can conduct a scene investigation, which hampers the responsibilities of the coroner or medical examiner and compromises the ability of investigators to evaluate death cases adequately.
- Research has identified 10 red flag markers in suspicious death cases, where there is a history of being victimized by domestic violence, that should be evaluated in any death investigation, and
- An independent right of family members of homicide victims has been created in federal law to obtain information, access victim services, and request an independent review of initial findings or the investigation of the death of their family member but the law applies only to those cases under federal jurisdiction. It is the intent of the Legislature to provide victim services and support to family members in suspicious death cases and support family members who seek a second opinion on the death of their loved one at no cost to any public agency whenever practicable.

Joanna had all 10 factors of a Suspicious Death, including prior strangulation. When all 10 factors exist, it has been our experience that it is always a homicide. If Joanna's law had been in place in 2011, we are convinced Joanna's killer would not have gotten away with murder. Since Joanna's law has passed, the Alliance has been working on implementation. Our Implementation Toolkits includes resources for families and law enforcement, access to training videos and webinars, guides for family members, pocket card for law enforcement, sample curriculum for a short line-up training and a new death investigation protocol in domestic violence cases.

The Alliance has also been working on Awareness. Joanna's case was recently featured on [48 hours, Joe Hunter's Mission](#) and Sacramento [ABC10, Hidden Homicides: Fighting for Answers](#). Investigative reporters have been instrumental to bringing awareness to this issue. Their stories have helped identify and reopen suspicious death cases, not only in California but across the United States and in other Countries. We are optimistic that as more suspicious death laws are passed, we will continue to see more family members being interviewed, treated with dignity and respect, getting answers to their questions and receiving the services they desperately need. We also anticipate less cases will be misclassified and less killers will get away with murder.

Finally, and most importantly, SB 1550 comes at a time of urgent need:

- Domestic violence homicides and suicides are on a rise in the United States ([When Men Murder Women, 2024](#)).
- Less autopsies are being conducted in suspicious death cases - from 60% in 2007 less than 5% (including Oregon 4%).
- Hidden Homicides are happening more often than we ever realized. A recent study conducted by Dr. Jane Monkton Smith estimates there could be as many as 130 Hidden Abuse Homicides per year in the UK which has a population of 38 million people. Given the population of the United States (342 million), the rate of domestic violence homicides in the United States could actually almost DOUBLE, from 2400 per year to 4800.

Ultimately, SB1550 will provide **HOPE** to families who have lost loved ones, **JUSTICE** to victims who have died under suspicious circumstances and additional **TOOLS** professionals need to conduct improved death investigations. It will also send a strong message to offenders that the system is watching and they will not get away with murder. We also believe, other states are watching. What happens in California and Oregon, will likely be replicated across the United States. There is a critical and urgent need for suspicious death laws in all 50 states, with each state making it better and stronger.

Thank you for your leadership in recognizing the need, your sense of urgency and improving Joanna's Law to include children. Please feel free to reach out to us at any time to support your efforts.

Always with great HOPE,



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