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Supervisors Vote to Implement Laura's Law

By Nick Marnell

The Board of Supervisors unanimously voted Feb. 3 to implement the State of California Assisted Outpatient Treatment Demonstration Project Act of 2002 ("Laura's Law") in Contra Costa County. The program was approved to run for three years, expected to begin this fall. Contra Costa joined eight other California counties that have either implemented or voted to implement some portion of Laura's Law, including Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego.

In 2001 Laura Wilcox, a 19-year-old Nevada County health care worker, was shot and killed by a mentally ill recluse who had resisted his family's attempt to get him into treatment. Wilcox's family advocated for passage of a law to permit court ordered treatment for the seriously mentally ill who pose a danger to themselves or others.

Laura's Law permits courts to order treatment for those who have been hospitalized or jailed twice within the past 36 months because of mental illness, or those who have been violent to themselves or others, or have threatened such violence, during the past four years. The order can be obtained only for people who have refused voluntary treatment and whose condition is substantially deteriorating.

Without Laura's Law, police and social workers who were confronted with a suicidal or violent person with mental illness had little choice but to arrest or hospitalize them, under California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 5150. "Our department averaged about 25 mental health committals from 2009-2012, but in 2013 it jumped to 45 and last year it was 41," said Moraga Chief of Police Robert Priebe. "Many of those committals involved persons who had been diagnosed and prescribed medications, but had stopped taking (or) refused to take the meds."

Last year near the UC-Santa Barbara campus, an outcast went on a murderous rampage, killing six students plus himself. The son of Moraga resident Lisa Perrella attended UCSB, and the shootings occurred close to his house. "It was very tragic and possibly could have been avoided had Laura's Law been in effect," said Perrella. "We are very happy to learn about the passage of Laura's Law and hope that future tragedies can be avoided."

Kathy McLaughlin, a member of the county's Consolidated Planning Advisory Workgroup, claimed that forcing treatment on individuals who do not want it does not work. "Would you force a cancer patient to accept radiation instead of chemotherapy? Why is mental illness different? Why is it okay to trample our rights and dictate what is the best treatment for us?" Disability Rights California, an advocacy group, has gone on record with its opposition to assisted outpatient treatment.

California counties were given the option to implement Laura's Law, but if they did, funding for county voluntary mental health programs could not be reduced. As such, Contra Costa County plans to design its program to establish the same level of service for both Laura's Law candidates as well as those who seek voluntary mental health treatment. The county Health Services Department has proposed to direct funding of \$2.25 million annually into the program, with an additional \$418,000 coming from the county general fund each year.

"Unfortunately, with severe mental illness, it's not just the person who is the victim, but also, in some horrible, horrific situations, it's a complete stranger," said Supervisor Candace Andersen.

"Laura's Law, in my mind, provides a safe, compassionate alternative to incarceration."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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