



Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association

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September 25th, 2023

Representative Michael S. Day, Chair
Senator James B. Eldridge, Chair
Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Michael Musto michael.musto@mahouse.gov
(Sent VIA Email Only)

Re: Testimony in Support of Stavri's Law H.922/S.650, An Act Relating to Threats of Suicide While in Court Custody

Dear Chair Day and Chair Eldridge,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association, representing the 14 Sheriffs in the Commonwealth, we unanimously endorse and strongly express our support of H.922/S.650, An Act Relating to Threats of Suicide While in Court Custody.

In memory of Stavri Yanka, this bill is designed to help avoid deaths in custody by alerting law enforcement officials to suicidal behavior provided in civil commitment proceedings, allowing appropriate adjustments to monitoring schedules to protect those in custody.

Currently, court officials do not enter SUI/Q5 (reports of self-harm or suicidal behavior while in law enforcement custody) information into Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) for individuals who engage in suicidal threats or behavior. Entering this data into CJIS would alert law enforcement agencies when interacting with high-risk individuals and minimize their risk of suicide. Additionally, Chiefs of Police would have access to SUI/Q5 information in CJIS in determining whether to grant or renew firearms licenses.

On November 4, 2021, Stavri Yanka, a 34 year-old man, was committed to the Berkshire County Jail and House of Correction by the District Court. Jail officials conducted routine security, medical and mental health intake screenings on Stavri but he did not disclose any information that would indicate that he was at increased risk of suicide. He denied any suicidal thoughts or behavior or any history of such thoughts or behavior. Jail officials checked for any SUI/Q5's and there were no such reports. Given the lack of any indication of suicidal ideation, Stavri was placed on routine monitoring (checked no later than every 30 minutes).

On November 5, 2021, the District Court ordered that Stavri be held at the jail for 60 days. A mental health clinician met with Stavri following his return to jail from court and Stavri

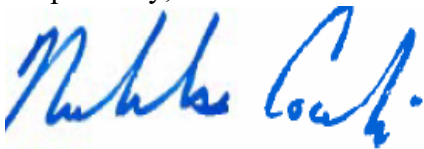
gave no indication of suicidal ideation. Stavri committed suicide while in custody on November 7, 2021. Unknown to correctional officials, Stavri's family had unsuccessfully sought a Section 12 civil commitment and also appeared before the District Court on a Section 35 petition just 5 months before he was incarcerated. The incident which precipitated the Section 35 petition was Stavri tying a zip tie around his neck. The Court denied the Section 35 petition. Had correctional officials been aware of recent, potentially suicidal behavior by Stavri, reported in the court, they would have placed him on a heightened watch status until he could meet with a mental health clinician.

The American Psychological Association reports that "64 percent of jail inmates, 54 percent of state prisoners, and 45 percent of federal prisoners" have reported mental health concerns. Approximately half the people in U.S. jails and over one third of the population of U.S. prisons have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Screening upon intake as well as mental health screenings are important measures to help identify individuals who may be experiencing suicidal ideations, be at risk of suicidal behavior or who have a history of suicidal attempts. Unfortunately, inmates are not always forthcoming. Stavri's death was tragic. It is tragic if knowledge known in a Section 35 proceeding of potential suicidal behavior, but not shared with the Sheriff's Office could have possibly saved a life. We will never know. Stavri's Law will help to solve a gap in the system by allowing the sharing of data into CJIS alerting law enforcement personnel when interacting with high-risk individuals who have engaged in suicidal threats or behavior to help minimize their risk of current and/or future risk of self harm. The Sheriffs share the priority of providing and enhancing mental health screening, identification, treatment and protection for all individuals in our care and custody.

We respectfully request your support of Stavri's Law H.922/S.650, An Act Relating to Threats of Suicide While in Court Custody. Together, this legislation will help to fill gaps in notification and most importantly, help to save lives.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,



Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi

Cc: Senator Jake Oliveira
Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier
Representative Brian Ashe
Sheriff Patrick McDermott, Vice President
Carrie Hill, Executive Director