

Discussion of Laura's Law held in Fresno

By Barbara Anderson

Funding has kept counties from implementing [Laura's Law](#), which allows people with serious mental illness to be ordered into outpatient treatment, the man who helped draft the law said Wednesday in Fresno.

"Money has always been the issue," said Randall Hagar, director of government relations at the California Psychiatric Association. But in the last year, counties are showing interest in the law since funds from the Mental Health Services Act, a state tax on millionaires, can be used to pay for services, he said.

Just last week, Mendocino County implemented the law, Hagar told members of the Fresno County Mental Health Board at its afternoon meeting.

Board Chairwoman Carolyn Evans invited Hagar to make a presentation on Laura's Law and convinced him to speak at an evening public forum.

Fresno County has not moved to implement the law, but Evans said the Board of Supervisors has asked for a briefing report. And she's invited patient advocates to offer their views on Laura's Law at a Mental Health Board meeting in January.

Counties cannot adopt the law without a resolution from supervisors.

Why counties decide to implement the law varies, Hagar told the Mental Health Board. "Why you might want to consider it here in Fresno County is probably best known by you," he said. For Kern County, which is weighing the merits of the law, a concern about a doubling of jail inmates with mental illness has been an impetus.

The law is meant for a narrow group of people who have a history of jail or hospitalization or have threatened themselves or others, Hagar said. The law was named for Laura Wilcox, a 19-year-old volunteer at a Nevada County mental health clinic who was shot and killed in 2001 by a man who had refused mental health treatment. Nevada County adopted Laura's Law in 2008.

Counties must have services available for people court-ordered into a treatment plan and the services cannot replace ones already offered in the community, he said.

The law has not been without controversy, with critics raising concerns over patients being forced into treatment.

Stan Lum, the supervising patients right advocate for Fresno County, said he's not convinced that the law doesn't violate due process rights. And he questions if the law is any more effective than voluntary services. There is evidence that the services "are wasteful," he said, "and the money could be better spent on expanding services."

The Fresno chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill has not taken a vote on Laura's Law, said Mary Lou Brauti-Minkler, chapter president. But the law has the support of NAMI-California, she said.

Brauti-Minkler said: "It's an important alternative to this other rigid system we have now."

Right now, people with mental illnesses can be held involuntarily on "5150" orders when they are deemed a threat to themselves or others. The process typically involves law enforcement and hospitalizations and "it's very traumatizing," Brauti-Minkler said.

Laura's Law could reduce the trauma and the lengthy process of getting help, she said. "It seems more humane. It is not humane to have the police and sheriffs come in every time."

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