

# Daily News

LOS ANGELES

## Tax dollars are wasted on forced psychiatric treatment

By Ann Menasche  
and Charmaine Mahealani Asher

**A**DVOCATES for forced psychiatric treatment are using the death of Kelly Thomas, a homeless man with schizophrenia, as a rationale for Orange County to implement Laura's Law.

This law is a controversial, costly measure that has not proven effective and would undermine the human rights of those labeled mentally ill. Mr. Thomas' death following a beating by Fullerton police is heartbreaking, but Laura's Law would not have prevented it.

Laura's Law expands forced treatment by allowing people with a history of hospitalization or suicide attempts to be placed under court-ordered treatment, even though they are not presently a danger to themselves or others. Those who fail to comply can be detained by police and hospitalized against their will, thereby increasing the possibility of more tragic incidents.

At the same time, Laura's Law does nothing to stem violence against those with psychiatric disabilities or the homeless nor does it provide police training in crisis intervention that might have saved Thomas' life. It also fails to address a root cause of homelessness — lack of affordable housing for those who must meet all their living expenses on \$830 in monthly disability benefits.

~~Forced psychiatric treatment — including the use of forced medication, is often counterproductive: renewing trauma and steering people away from the mental health system altogether.~~

Moreover, many psychiatric medications have a long list of toxic, even life-threatening side effects. Research indicates that although medications may reduce symptoms in the short-term, long-term recovery rates from serious psychiatric disability are higher for unmedicated patients than for those maintained on psychiatric medications.

Thus, many people have rational reasons for deciding against using or staying on these medications.

One of the authors of this piece, who has 18 years of experience as a

person diagnosed with severe mental illness, ended up in the emergency room twice because of debilitating side effects from psychiatric medications. She found medication ineffective; however, the individual psychotherapy she receives is alleviating her symptoms and helping her recover.

Currently, the law allows people who are a danger to themselves or others or gravely disabled to be involuntarily treated. Laura's Law potentially subjects any person with a significant mental health history to involuntary treatment, greatly expanding the number of people deprived of their rights without any clear gain to them or society.

Fortunately, there is no need for such extreme measures. Evidence shows that the expansion of voluntary mental health treatment builds trust and is the most effective approach to recovery from mental illness.

Orange County already offers full service partnerships (FSPs), a highly successful approach to voluntary mental health treatment that includes community based recovery services, housing, 24-7 emergency response, and family and peer support. FSPs have reduced hospitalization rates by 50 percent, incarceration rates by 88 percent and homelessness by 70 percent.

The FSPs are effective because they address critical needs of people with serious psychiatric disabilities who become homeless. We believe expansion of these programs in Orange County, combined with improved training for law enforcement staff in responding to people in crisis would be a successful twin-track approach.

Laura's Law is costly to implement, burdens our courts, and is unlikely to make a positive difference in anyone's life. In California's economic climate, scarce public dollars are far better spent expanding proven voluntary programs and crisis intervention training.

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