

Divide exists over involuntary mental health treatment

By Kirk Siegler, NPR

The attacks near UC Santa Barbara are renewing focus on programs aimed at requiring treatment for people who are mentally ill as a way to prevent mass shootings and other violence.

In California, a 2002 law allows authorities to require outpatient mental health care for people who have been refusing it. Proponents argue that this kind of intervention could prevent violent acts.

But counties within the state have been slow to adopt the legislation and mental health professionals are divided over its effects.

The story behind Laura's Law begins in 2001. In rural Nevada County 19-year-old Laura Wilcox was shot and killed by a 41-year-old man with a history of mental illness. He had walked into the county's behavioral health center and opened fire.

Tom Anderson was the county's chief public defender at the time and represented the gunman in court. He recalls that the man's family had tried to alert mental health officials numerous times before the shooting.

"[Officials] were declaiming privacy issues and stuff and wouldn't communicate with the family," Anderson says. "He ... started amassing guns and setting up booby traps around his house and he had this psychosis of he was going to be attacked any minute."

Now Nevada County's presiding judge, Anderson is also a vocal

advocate for Laura's Law, which was passed by the state legislature in 2002. The law allows counties to compel outpatient treatment for people whose family or friends are concerned about their mental state. It's seen as an intermediate step before someone is forced into inpatient psychiatric care.

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