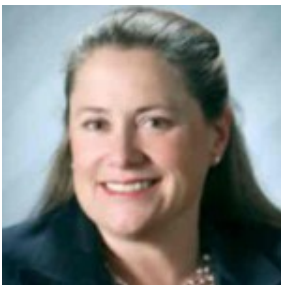


# Opinion: Placer County needs Laura's Law

By Jennifer Montgomery

Every day we encounter individuals – complete strangers, close friends and even family members – who are languishing on our streets and in our neighborhoods. Many suffer from serious mental illness, but due to a host of reasons have been unable to participate in treatment programs. They spiral downward until they are ultimately hospitalized or incarcerated, only to be released back into our communities to begin the cycle of despair and neglect all over again.

It is well past time that we as a society acknowledge their treatment needs and use the tools we have available to help them. Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT), also known as Laura's Law, is one tool that can help. It has been proven successful in Nevada and Yolo counties and 45 other states, and needs to be considered by all California counties.



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Laura's Law, approved by the state Legislature in 2002, was named for Laura Wilcox, a Nevada County student worker who was killed by a man who had refused mental health treatment. He entered the county's Behavioral Health offices and opened fire in January 2001. Laura's Law reformed the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act which had previously prohibited judges, families and

physicians from compelling the severely mentally ill to accept treatment.

Laura's Law permits counties to create AOT programs allowing for court-ordered (if deemed necessary and if all stringent criteria are met), voluntary, outpatient treatment for a select group of very mentally ill individuals – treatment that can be initiated by a family member, roommate, therapist, police officer, or physician, among others.

Since the law was brought to my attention when I was sworn in as a county supervisor in 2009, I have been a proponent of Laura's Law. I know from personal experience that effective treatment can be life-changing for individuals with serious mental illness. I have a family member who has struggled with mental illness since she became a teenager almost 60 years ago. When she is appropriately treated – on her medications and in counseling – she is smart, delightful, funny and well connected with the world around her.

But often – too often – she “chooses” to go off her medications and her downward spiral begins, over and over and over again. She is the perfect candidate for Laura's Law – not yet to the point of being deemed 5150, requiring involuntary treatment, but to the point of needing help that is beyond her immediate reach.

Chairman Jack Duran and I have been working together to show that Laura's Law is not only implementable in Placer County, but is the right tool to add to our mental health “tool belt” and that now is the right time to bring this forward.

AOT is a proven, evidenced-based practice that produces excellent results. In Nevada County AOT has been shown to reduce incarcerations by 53 percent, homelessness by 54 percent and psychiatric hospitalizations by 43 percent, while saving \$1.81 for every dollar invested in the program. New York State's implementation of the similar “Kendra's Law” AOT

program, produced nearly identical results. Furthermore, such programs help engage individuals into a voluntary lifelong recovery process and give them hope for a brighter future.

Opponents of AOT argue that any involuntary treatment will trample on the rights of the mentally ill. However, Laura's Law is voluntary and when we ignore the treatment needs of this sensitive population, we effectively abandon them to the streets, leading to increased incarcerations, hospitalizations, homelessness and conservatorships. Such outcomes have far more draconian impacts on these peoples' lives, with enormous and real impacts on their civil rights and the rights of others.

Orange, Los Angeles, and San Francisco counties have recently joined the ranks of Nevada and Yolo counties by choosing to implement Laura's Law. Later this summer, our Placer County Board of Supervisors will be considering the implementation of such a program in Placer County.

As the *Los Angeles Times* noted last May, "Laura's Law will not stop every tragedy or protect every person in need of care. But it will save some lives and prevent some suffering."

I wholeheartedly agree. Please join me in bringing Laura's Law to Placer County.

*Jennifer Montgomery is Placer County's supervisor for District 5.*