



ASAN

AUTISTIC SELF ADVOCACY NETWORK

Anti-Filicide Toolkit

Foreword: Killing Words

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Let me present to you a sequence of events.

On March 6th, a 22-year-old autistic man named George Hodgins was murdered in Sunnyvale, California. His mother, Elizabeth pulled out a gun, shot him point-blank, and then killed herself.

In the following days and weeks, journalists wrote about George Hodgins' murder. In their articles they called him "low functioning and high maintenance,"¹ and called Elizabeth Hodgins "a devoted and loving mother."² They sought out quotes from other parents of autistic children, who normalized the crime by saying things like "every mother I know who has a child with special needs has a moment just like that."³

People came to comment on these articles. They said that they felt sympathy for the mother. They called her George's "guardian angel." They said no one should judge her unless they had walked in her shoes. They said that it wasn't wrong because he was autistic, and autistic children are hell to raise. They said that it wasn't wrong because she was obviously responding to a lack of services. (In fact, she had refused services.) They said that it wasn't wrong because he was disabled, so and his life couldn't have been very good anyway.

On March 8th, Robert Latimer went on television to talk about how loving and compassionate it was when he gassed his disabled daughter Tracy. He called for "euthanasia" – the murder of disabled children by their parents – to be legalized in Canada. A woman who appeared with him agreed. She has two disabled children who she would like to kill, but she can't because it is against the law. No opposing viewpoints were presented.

On March 17th, the Autism Society released a statement about "the tragic story of Elizabeth Hodgins," which "shows that high stress on parents is very common in the autism community." The statement, signed by both Autism Society presidents, blamed her actions on a lack of services. They also noted that "the divorce rate among parents with a child with autism is as high as 70 percent due to the pressure," (this is actually a myth that was debunked in 2010⁴). They never even mentioned George's name.

On March 31st, Patricia Corby drowned her 4 year old autistic son Daniel in the bathtub, in San Diego, California.⁵

1 http://www.mercurynews.com/opinion/ci_20249537/march-17-readers-letters

2 http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/ci_20139097

3 http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_20133088/parents-autistic-children-speak-out-sunnyvale-murder-suicide

4 <http://www.kennedykrieger.org/overview/news/80-percent-autism-divorce-rate-debunked-first-its-kind-scientific-study>

5 <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2012/apr/04/mother-pleads-not-guilty-killing-son/>

We need to start looking at these murders as copycat crimes, which are encouraged when murders of disabled people receive positive press coverage. Just as Katie McCarron's murder followed "Autism Every Day,"⁶ Daniel Corby's murder follows George Hodgins' murder, and subsequent media coverage which excused, explained away, or even promoted the murder of disabled people by our parents.

When journalists call murderers "loving and devoted parents," when television shows give Robert Latimer airtime, when parents normalize murder by saying that all special-needs parents have murderous thoughts, the result is an environment in which these murders are seen as acceptable. Media coverage like this sends a message that homicide is a normal, understandable response to any discomfort one might experience while parenting a disabled child, and we can't pretend that other parents of disabled kids aren't hearing that message.

Let me present to you a sequence of events.

If you wrote an article about George Hodgins' murder, or if you gave a quote for one, or if you covered it on television, or if you blogged about it, or if you commented on it,

and

if you said that no one should "judge" the murder as wrong,

if you said that Elizabeth Hodgins was "driven to murder" by George's autism or by "lack of services,"

if you called the murder "understandable,"

if you said "it wasn't a murder, it was a mercy killing,"

if you said "all parents of special-needs children have felt this way,"

please take a minute to wonder if Patricia Corby heard you.

6 <http://archive.blisstree.com/feel/may-9th-may-13th-autism-every-day-katherine-mccarron/>

What is filicide?

In the past five years, over fifty people with disabilities have been murdered by their parents, relatives or caregivers in the United States alone.

These acts are horrific enough on their own. But they exist in the context of a larger pattern:

1. A parent kills their disabled child.
2. The media portrays these murders as justifiable and inevitable due to the “burden” of having a disabled person in the family.
3. If the parent stands trial, they are given sympathy and comparatively lighter sentences, if they are sentenced at all.
4. The victim is disregarded, blamed for their own murder at the hands of the person they should have been able to trust the most, and ultimately forgotten.
5. The media sends a message that if you kill your disabled child, you will receive attention and sympathy. The justice system sends a message that if you kill your disabled child, your punishment will likely be minimal.
6. Parents of kids with disabilities see these messages.
7. A parent kills their disabled child.

What does the term “filicide” mean?

“Filicide” is the legal term for a parent murdering their child. In the disability community, “filicide” is used when talking about a parent or other relative murdering a child or adult relative with a disability. This toolkit is specifically about filicide in the disability community. When we say “filicide,” we are talking about a pattern of violence that starts when a parent or caregiver murders their child or adult relative with a disability and continues in how these murders are reported, discussed, justified, excused, and replicated.

How common is it?

We don’t know. Filicide in general is very difficult to track, and filicide in the disability community is notoriously underreported. We are aware of over 50 filicides in the United States from the last 5 years where the victim was disabled. We know that the numbers we know of are much smaller than the reality.

Why are we only talking about filicide against people with disabilities?

Typically, when a child without a disability is murdered by their parents, everyone stands united in condemnation. No one attempts to understand, justify, or explain the murder. No one expresses sympathy for the murderer. No one argues that every parent has had moments or thoughts like that. No one understands. No one suggests that if the child had been easier or the family had had more support, this could have been avoided. The crime is punished harshly, and the victim is remembered and mourned.

When someone with a disability is murdered by their parents, the opposite happens.

Why does it happen?

Because we live in a world where disabled lives are valued less than the lives of people without disabilities.

Because we live in a world where people think it is better to be dead than to be disabled.

Because we live in a world where killing your disabled child is excused, minimized, and normalized.

Because we live in a world where this is okay.

Frequently Asked Questions About Filicide

Isn't this caused by lack of services?

It's absolutely true that people with disabilities and our families don't get enough services. But that's not what causes these murders.

There are thousands of families across the country with insufficient or nonexistent services who refrain from murdering their disabled family members. In addition, most high-profile cases have occurred in upper-middle-class communities and have been committed by parents who either refused services, or had more family services than is typical. This is not about services. Suggesting that murders could be prevented with more funding holds people with disabilities hostage: ***give us what we want, or the kid gets it!***

When disgruntled employees take guns into their workplaces and murder their colleagues, we don't use that as a launching point for a conversation about how Americans need better employee benefits or more paid leave. When students shoot people in their schools, we don't use this as a launching point for a conversation about anti-bullying policies. This doesn't mean that we don't care about worker's rights or student safety; it means that these are separate conversations, and combining them makes excuses for murderers. We feel that drawing a line between filicide and lack of services is equally inappropriate.

Is it a hate crime?

Yes and no. A hate crime is a crime that is motivated by bias; disability hate crimes are defined as crimes that are committed because of a bias or prejudice against disability. Filicide in the disability community is almost always about the person's disability, so in that sense, yes, this is a hate crime.

Legally, disability-related hate crime can only be persecuted on the federal level if it is inter-state, and individual states vary in their state-based hate crimes laws. Check your state to see if filicide related to disability can be considered a hate crime under state law; if not, consider lobbying your state legislature to include disability in your state's hate crimes statute, or to adopt one if your state does not have one.

Why is it bad to try to understand why someone might do this?

Filicide is a horrifying act, and wondering how someone could do this is a natural response. But when we progress to saying "I understand why someone would do this," or "but you have to understand," we are not just saying that we have thought about what motivated the killer - we are saying that the killer's actions make sense to us.

Our society's reactions to filicide reflect our beliefs about disability. When parents of kids without disabilities murder their children, we are universally united in condemnation. It is only when the victim is disabled that we pause. It is only when the victim is disabled that we are encouraged to understand.

This is a double standard, and it reveals dangerous things about our beliefs.

When we say *every parent of a disabled child has had moments like this* or *walk a mile in our shoes* or *the system failed everyone* or *but you have to understand how hard it is*, we are excusing a parent murdering their child. It does not matter how many times we say *not that I would ever condone this*: if we attempt to make a parent murdering their child understandable, if we ever attempt to position it as a comprehensible or inevitable or *normal* thing, if we take and normalize the perspective and the side of abusers and murderers, we are minimizing and excusing this act. Doing so puts the lives of disabled people everywhere in danger.

There are absolutely things we should understand about filicide. There are absolutely people with whom we should empathize. We should understand that filicide is not committed by loving parents. We should empathize with the victims. But to say, “I don’t condone the murder but I understand it,” is to say, “This is bad, but it isn’t **so** bad if we put it in context.”

We do not believe that this is a good way to talk about murder.

But anyone who would kill their child, or try to kill their child, must have a mental illness. Doesn't that change how we should think about this?

Filicide is not a symptom of mental illness. Filicide indicates a decision to murder. These decisions are deliberate and often premeditated for days or weeks. The perpetrators of filicides are often evaluated and found competent to stand trial.

Saying that only mentally ill people would commit a murder can make some people feel better, but it’s not true. People with mental illness are no more violent than the general population - but, like people with developmental disabilities, they are often the targets of violent crimes. When we’re talking about cases where people with disabilities are murdered by parents, invoking mental illness is just a way of blaming one group of people with disabilities for the murders of other people with disabilities, and shifting the blame away from the person who is actually responsible - the murderer.

How do we talk about this?

Names: to discourage copycats, **don't** use the full name of the murderer. **Do** use the name of the victim.

Sympathy: as with any other murder, **do** humanize the victim. **Do** unequivocally condemn the murder. **Do** mourn the victim. **Don't** sympathize with the murderer.

Be mindful of anti-disability bias: **don't** imply that it is better to be dead than disabled, that disabled people experience a lower quality of life, or that we cause other people to suffer. **Do** use respectful language, and **do** consult with people with disabilities.

Focus: **don't** give the murderer a platform. **Do** center the victim.

Don't refer to filicide as mercy-killing.

Don't talk about services in the context of filicide.

Do be mindful of the potential for copycat murders:

- avoid using the killer's name or giving them a platform
- focus on the victim, and
- avoid grisly sensationalism.

Do write about filicide against a disabled victim the same way you write about any other filicide.

How Can We Prevent This?

1. Change the conversation

Center the victim. Condemn the murderer. Refuse to “understand,” excuse, justify, minimize, or normalize a parent killing their child. Refuse to accept this. Refuse to allow this to become our new normal.

2. Prosecute

Call for these crimes to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, similarly to other filicides. Demand that people with disabilities have equal protection under the law. Consider lobbying your state legislature to include disability in your state’s hate crimes statute, or to adopt one if your state does not have one.

3. End ableism

Challenge ableism (anti-disability bias and prejudice) everywhere you see it. Challenge the idea that it is better to be dead than disabled, that disabled people are a drain on society, that disability means suffering, and that disabled lives are not worth living. Promote inclusion, community integration, and acceptance.

4. Self-report

If you think you are going to harm your child or adult relative, turn yourself in. Call 911 or child protective services and say “I am thinking about killing my child.”

5. Community reporting

If someone you know is talking about killing their child, turn them in. Often in the wake of a filicide people come forward to say that days or months before the murder, the perpetrator made a comment to them suggesting that they were contemplating homicide: “I’m despairing about my child’s condition - I think this is the end for him,” or “kids like mine should be put down,” or even “I am thinking about killing my child.” In addition, report any indications you might see of child abuse or child neglect. Abuse and neglect of children and adults with disabilities is very common and extremely under-reported, and many filicides are preventable escalations.

What do I do if this happens in my community?

1. Get the language right

Change the conversation: challenge poisonous ideas and help prevent copycat crimes. Read “How do we talk about this?” for more.

2. Hold a vigil

Mourn the victim and call for justice. See our vigil guidebook at the end of this toolkit for more.

3. Watch the media

Encourage journalists to speak to disabled people, follow best practices for preventing copycat crimes, center the victim, and treat this filicide like all other filicides. Refer them to this toolkit. Push back when they make mistakes.

4. Push back

If someone attempts to justify, minimize, or normalize the murder, challenge them. Don't let them interpret your silence as agreement.

5. Sentencing

Call for the harshest possible sentence under the law. Emphasize that people with disabilities have a right to expect full and equal protection under the law.

6. Call for hate crimes legislation

As appropriate, advocate for expanding state and federal hate crimes legislation to include disability and filicide against disabled victims.

7. Hold the justice system accountable

Contact your local protection and advocacy agency, your local FBI field office, and your district attorney. Let them know that the disability community is watching. Let them know that we are outraged. Tell them to do their jobs.

How to Hold a Vigil: Site Coordinator's Guidebook

Choose and confirm a location

An ideal location is accessible by public transportation, in a public space, and somewhere that gets some foot traffic. It should also have some relevance to the issues we are calling attention to – **holding your event in front of a courtroom, City Hall, or your DA's office sends the message that we want the justice system to take this seriously.** However, if it is prohibitively cold in your area, try contacting local non-profits to see if you can use their space for your vigil.

If your event will be on public property (recommended), **you must get in touch with your local police department to find out if you need a permit.** Your city may not require a permit in order to hold events on public property, but you do absolutely need to have someone call the police department, using their non-emergency number, and confirm this.

Sample script for this call: “Hi, I’m planning an event at [place] at [day/time]. It’s a vigil for people who have died. We’ll be reading some statements and holding signs. I’m calling to ask whether we need a permit for this?” **If they say yes:** “Okay, could you talk me through how I can get one?”

If you want to use candles, you should ask about that during this call. Some places need it specified on the permit if you will be lighting candles, and some places will not allow it during a public event.

If you are planning a Day of Mourning vigil, you should have your location and time pinned down three weeks before the event. If you are planning a vigil in the wake of a recent murder, you will not have this kind of advance notice, but **do secure your location as soon as possible.**

Use Facebook to announce your vigil

Once you have your time and location, you can start spreading the word about your vigil. Begin by making a Facebook event page.

Savannah Nicole Logsdon-Breakstone is ASAN’s Social Media Director. Make sure to include her as a co-administrator of your Facebook event page. She will be easy to find, as no one else on Facebook has this full name.

As well as using Facebook to invite people you personally know, reach out to local organizations and ask them to send the link to their members. You don’t need to stick to disability rights organizations – other groups focused on social justice issues, such as LGBT groups, may be willing to help promote the event as well.

You can also create and spread flyers with the time and location of your event. Leave stacks of them with friendly organizations, and post flyers around your area. Email jbascom@autisticadvocacy for a customizable copy of ASAN's template, or feel free to make your own.

In the run-up to the 2013 Day of Mourning, some vigil sites received threatening, offensive comments on their pages. The commenter did not show up to any of the vigils, but ASAN's policy is to take threats seriously to ensure our members' safety. **If you receive aggressive comments on your page, especially if they mention or allude to physical violence, these are the steps to follow:**

1. Take a screen capture of the comment. If you don't know how to do this, Google "screencap+mac" or "screencap+PC," depending on which type of computer you are using.
2. Delete the comment.
3. Ban the commenter from accessing the event page.
4. Call the local police (again, using the non-emergency number) to report that an online threat has been made about an upcoming event which will take place on public property. Give them the time and location of the event. Let them know that you have a screen capture of the comment and can email it to them.
5. Get in touch with ASAN and let us know what happened. Email us your screencap as well.

Reach out to the press

Getting media presence at your vigil is very important. Our goal is not only to mourn our dead, but to send a message that our lives are equally valuable, and society should treat us as such. We are calling for states to prosecute these murders as aggressively as they prosecute the murders of non-disabled children. We are calling for journalists to write about these murders in a way that respects the victim, not in a way that excuses the murderer. These demands are more powerful if more people know about them. This is why it is **vital to maximize press presence at your vigil.**

The first step is to **create a press list.** Look up your local newspapers, radio and tv stations – they should have a "contact us" or "report a news tip" page on their website which will tell you where to send a press release. You can also contact local non-profits and ask them if they have a list of press contacts they would be willing to share with you. This may save you time if your vigil has to be planned quickly. If there has been a murder or attempted murder in your area recently, you should also contact the reporters who wrote articles or reported on TV about the case. Compile the email addresses and phone numbers you find into a list of contact information. This is your press list.

Get in touch with your Mayor and/or District Attorney's office and invite them to send a representative. If they agree, you should include this in your press release and mention it when you speak with reporters. This will give local media more incentive to attend your vigil.

If you are planning your vigil for more than two weeks out, send the first press release to everyone on your press list 1-2 weeks before the event. If your vigil will be sooner, just send the press release as soon as possible. If you do not have time to send individual emails, you can enter every email address on your list into the "BCC" field of a message, and then begin it with a generic salutation such as "To whom it may concern". If you can, follow up with another email one week before the event, or on a shorter timeline, a few days before. In the few days immediately before your vigil, you should also make some phone calls to the offices of local newspapers and TV stations.

See the next page for a template press release.

Template Press Release

NOTE: If there has been a recent murder or attempted murder case in your state, or especially in your local area, make sure to include a paragraph on this in your press release.

For Immediate Release

[the date you are sending out the press release]

Local Contact: [your name]

Phone: [phone number where you can be reached during the day]

Email: [your email]

Local Disability Community Commemorates Lives of Disabled Filicide Victims

[YOUR CITY] – As part of a nation-wide Day of Mourning, disability rights advocates in the [your city] area will be holding a vigil on [date] to honor the lives of disabled people murdered by their families and caretakers. [If this vigil is for a specific incident in your community, replace “As part of a nation-wide Day of Mourning,” with “In memory of [victim]”]

Over 50 such murders have been reported in the United States in the last five years, over 20 in the last year alone. The total number of killings is likely higher than the amount which are reported in news media. We must address violence against people with disabilities and speak out against the dangerous cultural prejudice that says a disabled life is not worth living.

The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, Not Dead Yet, and the National Council on Independent Living held the first Day of Mourning in 2012 as a response to the murder of George Hodgins, a 22-year-old autistic man from California, by his mother. Day of Mourning is a national event, with around fifteen participating cities each year.

Little public attention is paid to the disabled victims of these violent acts. Media coverage and public discourse about such killings frequently justifies them as “understandable” and sometimes “merciful,” rather than appropriately condemning these crimes and those who commit them. The national Day of Mourning is a time for the disability community to commemorate the many lives cut short. By honoring disabled victims of murder and celebrating the lives that they lived, these vigils send a message that disability is not a justification for violence.

The [your city] vigil will be held at [location], and begins at [time]. Speakers will be [if you have a list of speakers, put it here, making sure to include job titles if relevant].

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Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) is an inclusive international non-profit organization run by and for autistic people. ASAN seeks to advance the vision of the disability rights movement in the world of autism. Drawing on the principles of the cross-disability community on issues such as inclusive education and community living, ASAN focuses on organizing the community of autistic

adults and youth to have our voices heard in the national conversation about us. In addition, ASAN works to advance the idea of neurological diversity by furthering the view that the goal of autism advocacy should not be to create a world without autistic people. Instead, it should be to create a world in which autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other citizens.

Not Dead Yet is a national, grassroots disability rights group that opposes legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia as deadly forms of discrimination against old, ill and disabled people. Not Dead Yet helps organize and articulate opposition to these practices based on secular social justice arguments. Not Dead Yet demands the equal protection of the law for the targets of so-called “mercy killing” whose lives are seen as worthless.

The National Council on Independent Living is the longest-running national cross-disability, grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. Founded in 1982, NCIL represents thousands of organizations and individuals including: Centers for Independent Living (CILs), Statewide Independent Living Councils (SILCs), individuals with disabilities, and other organizations that advocate for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities throughout the United States.

Materials

All you really need for a vigil is the list of names and your prepared remarks, but it can be helpful to have additional materials. You can make signs with slogans (for example, “No excuse for murder,” “Mourn for the dead and fight for the living”), or have cardstock and markers available for attendees to make their own. A display of photographs of the victims is a good way to honor them as individuals, and many people find it more moving to look at pictures of people who have died, than to hear or read their names.

You can also print out and distribute this year’s flyers and posters (available on the ASAN website), and have a sign-in sheet for attendees.

Most sites choose to incorporate candles into their vigils. If you are not allowed to have open flames at your site, or if it is very windy, consider using battery-powered candles instead.

What kinds of things to do at a vigil

- It’s a good idea for the site coordinator, or someone on your team, to prepare remarks for the event. If you can line up additional speakers in advance, this is even better. There will be some sample remarks available on the ASAN website.
- Remember, the purpose of this vigil is to remember disabled people who were killed by their parents or caregivers and to mourn our dead, but also to send a message that our lives are equally valuable, and society should treat us as such. We are calling for states to prosecute these murders as aggressively as they prosecute the murders of non-disabled children. We are calling for journalists to write about these murders in a way that respects the victim, not in a way that excuses the murderer.
- Light candles (or turn on electronic ones)
- Read the list of names. You can ask one person to read the whole thing, or pass the list in a circle, having each person read one name. Use discretion – if there are young children present at your event, consider reading only the names and ages, not the methods of killing, as these can be very disturbing.
- Moment of silence
- Invite attendees to speak if they have things to say
- Take pictures or video of your vigil and send them to ASAN