



Senator Angelique V. Ashby, 8th Senate District

SB 989 – Domestic Violence Related Deaths Act Strengthens Investigation Protocols for Suspicious Deaths

SUMMARY

SB 989 enhances investigation protocols in cases involving domestic violence-related deaths. This bill clarifies existing law to include family members to the definition of legal representatives, allows coroners to inquire into deaths they deem suspicious, and adds 10 evidence based factors to investigation criteria for death investigations.

BACKGROUND

In the United States, nearly half of all female and one-tenth of male homicide victims are killed by intimate partners.¹ Experts estimate approximately 800 – 1,200 hidden homicides occur each year, often referred to as staged crime scenes. The vast majority of these cases involve murdered women, with no accountability for their killers.

Crime scene tampering and staging is a concerning phenomenon primarily involving male offenders and female victims, often occurring within intimate partner relationships.² These cases occur when a perpetrator of domestic violence kills his partner and subsequently stages the crime scene to look like a suicide or accident –in an attempt to redirect the investigation away from themselves.

Tampering and staging create significant challenges for investigators, impeding on their ability to effectively investigate these cases. These complications then extend to coroners and medical examiners, complicating their efforts to determine accurate causes of death, which are often misclassified as suicides or accidents.

In situations classified as suicides or accidents, a thorough autopsy is typically not performed. Consequently, vital forensic evidence may be lost, particularly if the case is later considered suspicious and re-opened. It is common for a victim's partner to request cremation of the victim, thereby eliminating potential forensic evidence that could have been revealed through an autopsy.

¹ [Examining Intimate Partner Violence-Related Fatalities: Past Lessons and Future Directions Using U.S. National Data](#)

THE PROBLEM

Research has identified ten key factors that should prompt thorough examinations in suspicious death cases involving a history of domestic violence.³ While federal legislation, such as The Homicide Victims' Families Rights Act, recognizes the importance of revisiting unresolved homicide cases and offers avenues for re-evaluation with independent investigators, its scope is limited to cases falling under federal jurisdiction.

Additionally, the federal law does not offer the tools needed by law enforcement and coroners to properly inquire into cases they deem suspicious. Unfortunately, this leaves families in California with similar unresolved cases without access to the legal remedies and administrative processes provided by the federal law. To effectively safeguard women from murder and concealment, it is crucial to develop more refined tools for detection.

THE SOLUTION

SB 989 is a crucial step towards ensuring justice for women impacted by domestic violence-related deaths. This bill equips investigators, coroners, and families with the necessary tools and evidence-based detection measures to identify suspicious cases. SB 989 ensures that California conducts thorough investigations into suspicious deaths involving histories of domestic violence and establishes a voice to families who have long been silenced.

SUPPORT

- [Alliance for HOPE International](#) (sponsor)
- San Francisco Safehouse (sponsor)
- Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention
- Academy of Forensic Nursing
- Forensic Behavioral Services
- Voices Survivor Advocacy Network
- California District Attorney's Association
- California Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Association
- California Professional Firefighters

² ['The Perfect Murder': An Exploratory Study of Staged Murder Scenes and Concealed Femicide](#)

³ [Predictors of Staged Suicide Scenes in Domestic Violence Cases](#)

- Chino Police Department
- Junior Leagues of California, Public Affairs Committee
- Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office
- Peace Officers' Research Association of California (PORAC)
- San Francisco Safe House
- San Diego County
- San Diego County District Attorney's office

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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