

## Another Voice / Mental health

# Make Kendra's Law permanent or pay in tragedy

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When you heard that Jason Wells, a 37-year-old man with schizophrenia, allegedly beat, stabbed and murdered 81-year-old Ruth Fisk, what were your first thoughts?

Conservatives tend to want to lock up the perpetrator, concentrating more on the public safety benefits. Liberal hearts instinctively go out to the perpetrator, recognizing that the incident was most likely due to lack of treatment.

No matter what your perspective, the best approach to prevent incidents like this in the future has proven to be Kendra's Law. New York State's Kendra's Law allows judges to order certain mentally ill individuals — those with a past history of violence or multiple hospitalizations — to stay on violence-preventing medicines as a condition of living in the community.

It keeps the patient healthier and the public safer. It even saves money. But New York State Commissioner of Mental Health Michael Hogan doesn't want the law to become permanent.

Ten years ago, conservative and liberal groups banded together to encourage the New York State Legislature to pass the law. It was named after Kendra Webdale, a former Fredonia resident who was pushed to her death in front of a New York City subway train by a mentally ill Andrew Goldstein.

Studies show Kendra's Law helps the mentally ill by reducing homelessness (74 percent), suicide attempts (55 percent) and substance abuse (48 percent). It improved quality of life, increased medication compliance and individuals under the court orders said they were better off for it.

Liberals can cheer.

But Kendra's Law has also been proven to keep the public safer by reducing physical harm to others (47 percent), property destruction (43 percent) and arrests (83 percent).

Conservatives can cheer.

And if you hate big government, Kendra's Law is the ticket. It saves money by reducing use of more expensive services like incarceration (87 percent) and hospitalization (77 percent).

So why are the New York State Office of Mental Health and some providers of mental health services opposing making the law permanent?

Hogan says he supports the law. But his actions are different. In his Statewide Plan for Mental Health services, he stated, "Treatments that are theoretically the best but not accepted by an individual are unlikely

to be effective.” So much for the research proving otherwise.

Some providers of mental health services oppose Kendra’s Law because they fear they will lose the ability to pick and choose easier-to-treat patients and will be ordered by the court to treat the more symptomatic patients.

Kendra’s Law should be made permanent. If not, we can expect more Jason Wells to be put behind bars and more Ruth Fisks under ground.

*D. J. Jaffe is a board member of the Treatment Advocacy Center ( [www.kendraslaw.org](http://www.kendraslaw.org) ).*



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