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February 2, 2026

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 1550.

I am here today from the perspective of someone who has spent over 30 years working alongside survivors of domestic and sexual violence, families who have lost loved ones, and multidisciplinary partners across housing, healthcare, legal systems, and community response. From that vantage point, I can say clearly: SB 1550 addresses a real and urgent gap in how we identify and respond to lethal domestic violence in Oregon.

Hidden homicides occur when deaths are misclassified as suicide, accident, or overdose, despite evidence suggesting lethal violence should be considered. These cases often involve patterns we recognize every day in victim services—coercive control, strangulation, stalking, sexual violence, escalating threats, and isolation. When those patterns are not fully investigated after a death, families are left without answers, systems lose critical learning opportunities, and dangerous perpetrators may never be held accountable.

We also know that strangulation is one of the strongest predictors of serious future harm, in the context of domestic violence as well as sexual violence. Survivors who have been victimized by nonfatal strangulation are dramatically more likely to later experience serious injury or be killed by the abuser. Yet strangulation frequently leaves little visible injury, making careful investigation and pattern recognition essential.

SB 1550 offers a thoughtful, evidence-informed solution. Importantly, it does not presume homicide. Instead, it ensures consistent, careful investigation when clear risk factors are present.

The bill establishes common-sense safeguards that many families already believe exist, including:

- More thorough investigations and autopsies when multiple red flags of domestic violence or child abuse are present.
- Notification of family rights to request records, autopsies, and inquests.
- Clearer access to medical examiner records so families can seek independent review.
- Independent review options when deaths are closed without a homicide determination.

From a systems perspective, these provisions strengthen trust in investigations. They improve transparency, support due process, and help ensure that critical evidence is not missed. Families frequently report being excluded from investigations or being unable to access information needed to understand what happened to their loved one. SB 1550 helps address those gaps.

We also cannot ignore the broader context. Domestic violence-related homicide remains a persistent reality in Oregon, with hundreds of lives lost over the past decade. At the same time, many survivors experience suicidal ideation due to trauma and coercive control, vulnerabilities that abusers may exploit to conceal lethal violence. This is also present for individuals with a history of sexual assault or stalking.

When suspicious deaths are not fully examined:

- Families are left without truth or closure.
- Perpetrators may avoid accountability.
- Patterns of lethal violence remain hidden.
- Future victims remain at risk.

From my experience leading a nonprofit that serves survivors across crisis response, housing, advocacy, and long-term stabilization, I have seen how early warning signs of lethal violence are often present long before a death occurs. SB 1550 helps ensure those warning signs are not ignored and given full consideration.

Ultimately, this bill is about dignity, accountability, and prevention. Recognizing hidden homicides is not only about justice for those who have died. It is about identifying dangerous patterns early enough to prevent future deaths.

I want to close by grounding this in what this looks like in real life.

In my work, I have sat across from survivors who were told, repeatedly, that what was happening to them wasn't "serious enough." Survivors whose partners controlled their phones, their money, their movements, and their relationships. Survivors who were told no one would believe them. Survivors who were threatened with death or told they would be made to look like they took their own lives.

And I have also sat with families after the tragic loss of life, families trying to piece together what happened to someone they loved. Families who know the history of violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Families who know the threats. Families who know the fear their loved ones lived with. And yet they are told, quickly, that the death was a suicide, or an accident, or an overdose; without the full picture ever being thoroughly examined or considered.

SB 1550 is about making sure we slow down enough to ask the right questions when the stakes are life and death.

It is about making sure warning signs like strangulation, coercive control, stalking, sexual violence, and escalating threats are not dismissed or missed when someone dies under suspicious circumstances. It is about ensuring families are treated as partners in the search for truth. And it is about ensuring our systems learn from every tragic loss of life so we can prevent the next one.

Because behind every case number is a person who is loved.

Behind every misclassified or suspicious death is a family living with unanswered questions.

And behind every missed warning sign is the possibility that another survivor is still living with someone capable of lethal violence.

We cannot prevent every act of violence.

But we can make sure our systems are strong enough, careful enough, and transparent enough to recognize it when it happens.

SB 1550 tells survivors, families, and communities something simple and powerful:

We will look carefully.

We will take patterns of violence seriously.

And we will not look away when the truth is hard.

I respectfully urge your support for SB 1550.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to safety for all Oregonians.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melissa Erlbaum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Melissa" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Erlbaum".

Melissa Erlbaum
Executive Director