



4110 SE Hawthorne Boulevard no. 503 | Portland, Oregon 97214  
Admin (503) 222-6507 | Crisis (503) 222-6222 | Fax (503) 222-4754  
We believe that everyone deserves to live a life free from violence.

February 4, 2026

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

I am the executive director of Raphael House of Portland where we have been providing safety and support services for survivors of domestic violence since 1977. Besides providing a confidential emergency shelter for these families fleeing violence we support survivors as they navigate the challenges they face after leaving an abusive relationship, establishing a new safe and stable home while continuing to maintain safety. At Raphael House, we believe that everyone deserves to live a life free from violence and, because of this mission, we write in strong support of SB 1550. This important bill requires heightened scrutiny in death investigations when a decedent has a known history of experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, or child abuse.

The connection between abuse and homicide is well established. Domestic violence is one of the strongest predictors of lethal violence, and perpetrators of abuse are disproportionately represented among homicide offenders and perpetrators of mass shootings. Within this context, non-fatal strangulation is one of the clearest and most dangerous indicators of future homicide. Research consistently shows that individuals who have been strangled by an intimate partner are approximately 750% more likely to be killed by that person. Strangulation often leaves little visible injury, yet it signals extreme control, escalating violence, and imminent lethality. Additionally, when a survivor is attempting to leave an abuser, there is a 75% greater risk of severe violence in the two years following the separation.

Many domestic violence-related homicides are preceded by coercive control, prior assaults, strangulation, threats of death, and repeated system contact. In some cases, perpetrators actively manipulate death scenes to make homicides appear as accidents, overdoses, or suicides—particularly when the victim has a known history of mental health challenges or substance use.

Without deliberate safeguards, these deaths risk being prematurely misclassified. Those of us working in the field already operate under the clear understanding that experiencing domestic violence can mean death—one of the reasons we maintain vigilance regarding confidentiality. This reality is reflected across our systems of care: law enforcement conducts lethality assessments on scene; district attorneys maintain specialized domestic violence and

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child abuse units; and community-based providers operate confidential shelters because the risk of homicide is real and ever-present. Our entire system of victim response is built on the assumption of potential lethality.

Yet when a death occurs, that same level of concern is not always applied during the investigation—especially when domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, or strangulation are part of the victim’s history. SB 1550 helps close that gap.

This bill establishes thoughtful, survivor-informed safeguards by:

- Requiring family interviews when multiple red flags are present, including histories of abuse or strangulation;
- Mandating written autopsy requests when there is a reasonable basis to suspect abuse-related death;
- Ensuring families are informed of their rights and can access investigative records; and
- Supporting accurate determinations of cause and manner of death without interfering with lawful investigative discretion.

When abuse-related homicides are correctly identified, systems can intervene more effectively, future victims may be protected, and public trust in our institutions is strengthened.

We are so grateful for Senator Gelser and the families who have brought this important bill forward with passion for survivor safety. We respectfully urge the Committee to pass SB 1550 and affirm Oregon’s commitment to survivor-informed justice, thorough investigations, and community safety.

Sincerely,

Emmy Ritter, MSW  
Executive Director  
Raphael House of Portland