



ASAN

AUTISTIC SELF ADVOCACY NETWORK

Anti-Filicide Toolkit

Foreword: Killing Words

by Zoe Gross

April 10, 2012

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.

1 Rodriguez, Joe, and Lisa Fernandez. "Parents of Autistic Children Speak out on Sunnyvale Murder-Suicide." *The Mercury News*, 8 Mar. 2012, www.mercurynews.com/2012/03/08/parents-of-autistic-children-speak-out-on-sunnyvale-murder-suicide/. Accessed 9 Jan. 2019.

2 Pecchenino, Nicki. "Guest Opinion: Death by Legislature." *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 9 Mar. 2012, www.santacruzsentinel.com/2012/03/09/guest-opinion-death-by-legislature/. Accessed 9 Jan. 2019.

3 Rodriguez and Fernandez, "Parents of Autistic Children Speak out on Sunnyvale Murder-Suicide."

4 "80 Percent Autism-Divorce Rate Debunked in First-of-Its Kind Scientific Study." *ScienceDaily*, Kennedy Krieger Institute, 19 May 2010, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/05/100519143403.htm. Accessed 9 Jan. 2019.

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

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.

5 Littlefield, Dana. "Mother Admitted Killing Son to Police." *San Diego Union Tribune*, 4 Apr. 2012, www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-mother-pleads-not-guilty-killing-son-2012apr04-story.html.

6 "Katherine 'Katie' McCarron." *Left Brain Right Brain*, 23 May 2006, leftbrainrightbrain.co.uk/2006/05/23/katherine-katie-mccarron/.

What is filicide?

In the past five years, over 600 people with disabilities have been murdered by their parents, relatives or caregivers.

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.⁷
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 600 filicides from the last 5 years where the victim was disabled.⁸ We know that the numbers we know of are much smaller than the reality.

⁷ David Perry et. al., “Media Coverage of the Murder of People with Disabilities by Their Caretakers,” *Ruderman Family Foundation*, 2017. http://rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Murders-by-Caregivers-WP_final_final.pdf.

⁸ Disability Day of Mourning, <http://disability-memorial.org/>.

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 prosecuted on the federal level if it can be considered to affect inter-state commerce. 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. To find out about your state's hate crime legislation, go [here](#).

⁹ Emily Willingham, "Here's Why You Don't Want to View Disability as an Excuse For Murder," *Forbes*, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2016/12/13/heres-why-you-dont-want-to-view-disability-as-an-excuse-for-murder/#61ee724e6396>; David Perry, "Why London McCabe's death matters," *CNN*, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/10/opinion/perry-autism-london-mccabe/index.html>.

¹⁰ Erika Harrell, "Crimes Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015- Statistical Tables" *U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics*, 2017, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/capdo915st.pdf>.

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.¹¹ 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.

11 Erika Harrell, “Crimes Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015- Statistical Tables”; Sarah L. Desmarais et. al., “Community Violence Perpetration and Victimization Among Adults with Mental Illnesses,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 12 (2007), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4133297/#>; Virginia Aldigé Hiday et. al., “Criminal Victimization of Persons with Severe Mental Illness,” *Psychiatric Services* 50, no. 1 (1999), <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/toc/ps/50/1>; Linda A. Teplin et. al., “Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 63, no. 8 (2005), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1389236/>; John S. Brekke et. al., “Risks for individuals with schizophrenia who are living in the community,” *Psychiatric Services* 52, no.10 (2001), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11585953>.

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.

Use respectful language

To find out about the most respectful language, talk to people with disabilities. For example, the autistic community prefers to say that someone *is autistic*, not that they *have autism*, but self-advocates with intellectual disabilities often prefer person-first language. **Don't** connect disability with suffering.

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** consult with people with disabilities when writing articles. **Don't** present disabled people as “burdens” or our existence as “stressors” that cause crime.

Say “murder,” not “mercy killing”

When a disabled person is killed by a relative or caregiver, **don't** call it a “mercy killing” - by using that term, you are saying that the murder was a good thing. **Do** use the terms “murder” or “homicide” as you would in other cases. In cases where the killer claims that the victim wanted to die, or asked to die, but there is no evidence of this, you should likewise report the case as a homicide, not an “assisted suicide” or “suicide pact.”

Center the victim

Do use the victim's name. **Do** talk to people who knew and cared about the victim, and can describe their personality, likes and dislikes. **Do** include details, and **don't** limit them to the clinical. What did the victim enjoy doing? What were they struggling with? What are some fond memories from the people in their life? The reader should get the sense that the victim was a real human being.

Don't give the murderer a platform

Do follow established journalistic best practices which are used to avoid encouraging copycat crimes. Focusing on the victim is one of these best practices. Additionally, avoid grisly sensationalism and in-depth descriptions of the method of murder. If possible, avoid using the full name of the murderer in news coverage. Crucially, **don't** use coverage of a murder to give the murderer a platform. If they have left notes, blog posts, or other writings which describe their life or their intention to commit murder, avoid printing direct quotes from these, and especially **do not** reproduce them in full. Make sure that your coverage **does not** focus on communicating the worldview of the murderer.

Don't take the murderer's word for it

In disability-motivated filicide cases, statements from the murderer about the life of the victim, or about the murderer's motivations, are often reported uncritically. This can include arguments that the victim wanted (or "would have wanted") to die, that the murderer killed out of love or concern for the victim's future, or even details about what level of disability services a family was receiving. When covering a murder, the murderer **should not** be the sole source of information for any fact that you report.

Don't present murder as a natural outcome of the situation

In the wake of these murders, we often see articles with headlines such as "Tragic Incident Highlights Struggles of Parents Caring For Children with Autism" or "Killing Draws Attention to Lack of Services for Family Caregivers." These articles first describe the murder and then include quotes from other family caregivers, or people working with caregivers, in the same local area.¹² These people detail the struggles of family members trying to care for disabled relatives with inadequate services to help them. They often explicitly excuse the murder ("I understand why he did it.") or normalize homicidal urges toward disabled relatives ("Any parent caring for an autistic child has had those dark moments."). Without meaning to, journalists writing these stories portray murder as the inevitable result of caring for a disabled person.

Don't make the conversation about services

It's absolutely true that people with disabilities and our families don't get enough services, and this is worthy of news coverage in its own right. But 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 - and the same "lack of services" articles were written about those cases in spite of the facts.

Other people to interview & other questions to ask

Again, make sure to talk to people who can speak to who the victim was as a person. These people may be the victim's friends, teachers, coworkers, faith leaders, or other relatives. Local or national disability rights advocates, or representatives of your state's Protection & Advocacy agency, can provide context on the issue of violence against people with disabilities. If it appears that the victim may have been killed because of their disability, and your state has hate crime laws that include disability, find out if this will be prosecuted as a hate crime. Report the answer either way

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

12 David Perry et. al., "Media Coverage of the Murder of People with Disabilities by Their Caretakers."

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.

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.¹³

¹³ Patricia M. Sullivan & John F. Knutson, “Maltreatment and Disabilities: A Population-Based Epidemiological Study,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24, (2000); Irit Hershkowitz et al., “Victimization of Children with Disabilities,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 77, (2007); Jeannette E. Manders, Zolinda Stoneman, “Children with disabilities in the child protective services system: an analog study of investigation and case management,” *Child Abuse and Neglect*, (2009).

What do I do if this happens in my community?

1. Contact ASAN

ASAN can help you plan your next steps and give advice on how to hold a vigil and call for justice. We also keep records of disability-motivated filicides. Email us at info@autisticadvocacy.org.

2. Get the language right

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

3. Hold a vigil

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

4. 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.

5. Push back

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

6. Sentencing

Call for sentencing parity under the law. Sentence parity means that people who kill disabled people receive comparable punishments as people who kill non disabled people. It also means that people with certain types of privilege (such as race and class) don't get lesser sentences than people without this privilege. Emphasize that people with disabilities have a right to expect full and equal protection under the law.

7. Call for hate crimes legislation

As appropriate, advocate for expanding state and federal hate crimes legislation to include disability and filicide against disabled victims. To find out about your state's hate crime legislation, go [here](#). See our toolkits about advocating with elected officials found [here](#).

8. Hold the justice system accountable

Contact your local P&A, 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. You can look up your local FBI office [here](#) and your local US attorney's office [here](#).

How to Hold a Vigil: Site Coordinator's Guidebook

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Timeline

January

1. Find and confirm a time and location.
2. Create a Facebook event.
3. Divide roles (who will distribute flyers, who will speak, etc.).

Early February (First two weeks)

1. Start spreading the word about your vigil.
2. Create flyers and posters or use the templates we provide.
3. Create a press list.
4. Identify speakers and readings for your vigil.
5. Think of any materials you may need and how to get them.
6. Find a backup location if you are holding your vigil outside.

Late February (Last two weeks)

1. Reach out to the press.
2. Advertise.
3. Make sure that you have all your materials and speakers ready.
4. Print posters and other materials.

The final list of names will go out the week before.

March 1st

Before the Vigil

1. Prepare all materials: handouts, posters, flyers, candles, etc.
2. Post on social media and the event page.
3. Ensure that you are ready for both names and readings (with backup copies).
4. Check the weather forecast and see if you'll need to use your backup location.

Choose and confirm a location

Make sure your location is accessible to people with a variety of disabilities. For example, people should be able to get to your vigil location using wheelchairs or other mobility devices, blind and partially sighted people should be able to navigate to your location, etc. For more information about ensuring your event is accessible, check out ASAN's [Accessible Event Planning guide](#).

An ideal vigil 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.

You may also want to hold your vigil indoors or in another non-public area. Try contacting local nonprofits or community meeting spaces, explaining the purpose of the Day of Mourning vigils, and asking if they might be willing to let you use their space. Here are some possible venues to approach:

- **Public colleges and universities.** Especially if you already have a connection to a university, these can be good places to hold events provided it is accessible to the public.
- **Public libraries.** Not all libraries offer free meeting spaces, but some do.
- **City buildings.** Some city-owned buildings may offer free meeting space for organizations.
- **Community centers,** particularly those for marginalized communities, for example, LGBTQ+ community centers.
- **Local community performance spaces.**

If you plan to hold your vigil outdoors, make sure you have a backup location reserved in case of rain or snow.

If you are planning a Day of Mourning vigil, you should have your location and time finalized as early as possible, but **at least 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.**

The Day of Mourning is March 1st and all vigils should take place on March 1st. As a nationwide event coordinated by ASAN, we do this to ensure coordination and social media outreach. It's also important that media outlets can report that all vigils are occurring on the same day. If you, as Site Coordinator, have a conflict and cannot attend a vigil on March 1st, think about partnering with someone or asking another person to coordinate the actual vigil. **If changing the date is absolutely unavoidable,** contact Haley Outlaw at houtlaw@autisticadvocacy.org to discuss your options.

Get a permit

If your event will be on public property, **you will probably need a permit**. Your city may not require a permit to hold events on public property, or may not require a permit for small gatherings. Even if you are not legally required to get a permit, if your city issues permits for assembly, you should still get one, in case you are asked about it during the vigil.

There is often a wait to get a permit - it can take anywhere from two weeks to over a month to approve or deny a permit. Therefore, **vigil coordinators should apply for a permit as soon as possible** after deciding on a venue.

The process of getting a permit, and the requirements for permits and public gatherings, are different in different places. Because of this, we cannot include very detailed instructions in this guidebook. To find out your city's permit policy, you can use a search engine on the web and search "[**your city or town**] + [**gathering or assembly permit**]". You can also call the local police department, using their non-emergency number, and ask about permit requirements.

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 how I can get a permit for this event."

If you want to use candles, you should ask about that during this call, or at some other point during the permit application process. 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 need help navigating the permit process or the permits website for your city, contact ASAN.

Finally, **remember to take your permit with you to the vigil**. If you can, bring a physical copy of the permit. If this is not possible, have the phone number of the city office that issued the permit so they can confirm it.

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.

Add ASAN as a co-administrator of the Facebook event. You can find instructions on how to do that [here](#).

We recommend that you also require comments to have approval before they are posted. This prevents people from posting hateful or disrespectful things on the event page. Any comment will first be seen by the event coordinator, who can decide whether to delete it or to post it. For instructions on how to restrict comments, look [here](#). If any comments are threatening, please follow our guidance on page 19.

If you have comments that are not threats, but are argumentative and/or disrespectful, you can delete them. You don't have to engage with people on this emotional, distressing topic. If you do want to respond, follow the guidelines and information from **How do we talk about this?** and **Frequently Asked Questions about Filicide**.

Advertise your event

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 houtlaw@autisticadvocacy.org for a customizable copy of ASAN's template, or feel free to make your own.

You can also use other forms of social media like Twitter to share information about your event, the Day of Mourning and murders that happen in your community.

Social Media Guide

Here are some example Tweets and Facebook posts that you can use for the 2020 vigils. You may want to share this guide with people attending the event.

You can also look at ASAN's Twitter @autselfadvocacy or in the Day of Mourning hashtag: #DDoM2020 for tweets that you can retweet. On Facebook, you can share posts from ASAN.

Tweets

2/28

- Tomorrow the disability community will gather across the nation to remember disabled victims of filicide <http://bit.ly/ddom2020> #DDoM2020

3/1

- Today is #DDoM2020. Make sure you join us as we honor our dead - find a local vigil at <http://bit.ly/ddom2020>

Not date-specific

- Join us to commemorate disabled people killed by parents or caregivers - find your #DDoM2020 vigil site <http://bit.ly/ddom2020>
- "I wish I could have known you. I bet you were a beautiful and interesting child." <http://owl.li/Nfds309l7no> #DDoM2020
- "You come from a group of people who have a history of being thrown away." <http://owl.li/9bqc309l7xA> #DDoM2020
- "When we are alive, we have to fight for recognition and in death our lives are cast in stereotypes." <http://owl.li/GaHe309l8fC> #DDoM2020
- When disabled people are murdered and abused, the way we talk about it matters. <http://owl.li/vCe6309l6Fc> #DDoM2020

- “Somebody calls autism a tragedy. Somebody kills an autistic person.” <http://owl.li/2kzv309l6P7> #DDoM2020
- “I am not a burden. I need to repeat that, because the opposite is told to me too frequently” <http://owl.li/yD5H309l7Eo> #DDoM2020
- “After I wrote this, another child was murdered. Randle Barrow, drowned by his mother. My heart hurts.” <http://owl.li/NnzF309l7JZ> #DDoM2020
- Closing out #DDoM2020 with Laura Hershey’s powerful poem, “You Get Proud by Practicing.” Let’s get proud. <http://owl.li/hLk5309l8PI>

Facebook Posts

2/28

- Tomorrow the disability community will gather across the nation to remember disabled victims of filicide <http://bit.ly/ddom2020> #DDoM2020

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- Today is #DDoM2020. Make sure you join us as we honor our dead - find a local vigil at <http://bit.ly/ddom2020>

Not date-specific

- For the last eight years, we have come together on Disability Day of Mourning to send a clear message that disability is not a justification for violence. We’ll be at our local vigils this Friday, March 1st – and we hope to see you there. Find your nearest vigil at <http://bit.ly/ddom2020> #DDoM2020
- “You don’t know me. You will never know me. You were murdered when you were three years old. But we have something in common: We are both autistic. Both of us have brains that work differently than usual, perceive and respond to the world differently than usual. I wish I could have known you. I bet you were a beautiful and interesting child.” <http://owl.li/Nfds309l7no> #DDoM2020
- “And I, a woman with Down Syndrome, want to be the first to give you the second bit of news. Yes, you come from people who have a history of being thrown away, but you also come from a group of people who have learned how to survive.” <http://owl.li/9bqc309l7xA> #DDoM2020
- “When we are alive, we have to fight for recognition and in death our lives are cast in stereotypes and clichés that robs us of our innate humanity.” <http://owl.li/GaHe309l8fC> #DDoM2020

- “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.” <http://owl.li/vCe6309l6Fc> #DDoM2020
- “Somebody calls autism a tragedy. Somebody kills an autistic person.” <http://owl.li/2kzv309l6P7> #DDoM2020
- “I am not a burden. I need to repeat that, because the opposite is told to me too frequently, and digs in, and catches hold. I am not a burden.” <http://owl.li/yD5H309l7Eo> #DDoM2020
- “After I wrote this, another child was murdered. Randle Barrow, drowned by his mother. My heart hurts.” <http://owl.li/NnzF309l7JZ> #DDoM2020
- We close out Disability Day of Mourning with Laura Hershey’s powerful poem, You Get Proud by Practicing. “Remember, you weren’t the one who made you ashamed, but you are the one who can make you proud.” <http://owl.li/hLk5309l8PI> #DDoM2020

If you receive threatening comments

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. Do not respond to the comment or contact the person who wrote the comment.
2. Take a screen capture of the comment. Screen captures are also called screenshots and screen-caps. How to screencap depends on the type of computer. There are four Wikihow articles for computer operating systems listed below. For other operating systems you might be using, you can Google or search Wikihow for "Screencap + [operating system]" or "Screenshot + [operating system.]"
 - a. **Mac OS:** <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201361> or <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Mac-OS-X>
 - b. **Windows PC:** <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Microsoft-Windows>
 - c. **Chrome OS**, runs on Chromebooks: <http://www.wikihow.com/Screenshot-on-Google-Chromebook>
 - d. **Linux:** <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-a-Screenshot-in-Linux>
3. Report the comment to Facebook. This should bring up an option to ban the commenter from the event page. You may have to report the multiple comments from the same person for this to work. If you need help figuring out how to ban the commenter from your event page, contact ASAN.
4. Once you have reported the comment to Facebook, delete it.
5. Get in touch with ASAN and let us know what happened as soon as possible. Include the screencap in an email. We take threats seriously and will have our Legal Director advise.
6. ASAN may advise you to alert the local police that you have received a threat. If this is necessary, call the police department 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.

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.

You may want to 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. Please note that this template press release requires customization.

You should use the template from *the current year’s guidebook*, rather than copying and pasting one from a previous year. This is because the statistics included in the press release change each year.

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]”]**

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), which tracks these cases, has compiled a list of over 1300 reported murders of people with disabilities by relatives or caregivers over the last 39 years. The total number of killings is likely higher than the amount which are reported in news media. This problem is made worse by irresponsible news coverage which presents these murders as the sympathetic acts of loving and desperate parents, by a justice system which often gives a lighter sentence to a parent who kills a disabled child, and by the dangerous cultural prejudice that says a disabled life is not worth living.

ASAN 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. ASAN has continued to organize the event each year, partnering with other disability rights groups including Not Dead Yet, the National Council on Independent Living, the Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, ADAPT, and the American Association of People with Disabilities. Day of Mourning is a national event, with 30-40 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].

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization run by and for autistic

people. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement with regard to autism. ASAN believes that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which autistic people enjoy the same access, rights, and opportunities as all other citizens. We work to empower autistic people across the world to take control of our own lives and the future of our common community, and seek to organize the autistic community to ensure our voices are heard in the national conversation about us. Nothing About Us, Without Us!

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 find photographs on the Disability Day of Mourning website, <http://disability-memorial.org/>.

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.

The list of names

Every year, ASAN sends site coordinators the list of names that will be read at the vigil, as well as a file which can be used to print large-sized posters displaying these names. **The names and posters are not sent out until the week before the vigils.** This is because it is likely that we will find out about more murders in the months and weeks leading up to the vigil, and we will want to include those victims’ names on the list.

The list includes each victim’s name, age, and date of death, as well as how they were killed. After several years of maintaining the list of victims and adding to it through research, the list now has over 1300 names on it. Reading out all these names can be a logistical challenge. You will want to decide in advance how you plan to tackle this. Some options are:

- Read just names, names and ages, or all of the information provided.
- Ask one person, or several volunteers, to read all the names from the list. Having each volunteer read a full page (around 50 names) before switching to a different volunteer can make the reading go more smoothly.
- Pass the list around to everyone at the vigil, asking each person to read a name until the whole list has been read (note: this takes longer than having just a few people read from the list).
- Read the list from start to finish at a specific point in your vigil.
- Divide the list into a few sections and break up the sections with speakers and other readings.
- Use the entries on disability-memorial.org to create a slideshow commemorating the victims.

In addition to the full list, **ASAN will release a list of names added to the Day of Mourning list in the last year.** Because of the way we find out about these murders, we are constantly adding names to the list of people who were killed years or even decades ago. This is why ASAN creates a list of names added to the list in the past year, rather than a list of those murdered in the past year. If we read only the names of the people who died most recently, some people's names would never be read at all.

The list of names added in the last year is the shortest list organizers can read. If you think that you will not have the capacity to read the full list at your vigil, you can choose to read this list instead. **ASAN will also be sending out a recording of all the names being read** (both the full list and the list of names added in the last year), which site coordinators can play at the vigil, rather than having someone at the vigil read the list.

To ensure your vigil goes smoothly, plan for reading the names to take a significant chunk of time. One person reading just the names (as opposed to including age and date) might be able to read the full list in about a half an hour. Passing the list around and reading all the information could take well over an hour. It's okay to factor this into your decision-making about how much information to read aloud and how to logistically manage reading the list.

If you have the capacity to read the full list at your vigil, we encourage you to do so. For some of the people on the list, the vigils may be the only time when their deaths are mourned. We are trying to make sure that their lives are commemorated for years to come - and in some cases, we are the only people who will do that.

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. The next page has some readings written by members of our community you can read.
- 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 (see above for more information on handling the list)
- 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

- If friends or family members of people with disabilities who have been killed come to your vigil, you will want to be very nice to them. They've also come to grieve. You may want to give them the opportunity to speak about their loved one. They may not use perfect language, but unless they are being actively hostile or disruptive, you should give them an opportunity to share without correcting them. It's also possible that they may not want to speak.

Readings

On this Day of Mourning, our community is coming together from all across the country--this year, from all across the globe. After the devastation we've endured all year, we take strength in each other and in our shared community.

At times like these, we can find ourselves speechless. We rely on others to speak the words we may not have. ASAN has collected links to a number of readings you may want to consider using at your vigil. Together, we speak out. Together, we mourn.

- [Killing Words](#) by Zoe Gross
- [Connecting Dots](#) by Bev Harp
- [Father's Day 2000](#) by Dick Sobsey
- [In Memoriam](#) by Squiditty
- [Memorial to Katherine \(Katie\) McCarron](#) by Mel Baggs
- [Letter To A Baby Who Was Thrown From A Bridge](#) by Astra Milberg
- [I Am Not A Burden](#) by Tuttle
- [Remember](#) by Amy Sequenzia
- [Not Human Anymore- Is This What "Ally" Means? on Autistic Hoya](#) by Lydia Brown
- [Murder Not Mercy](#) by Cara Liebowitz
- [You Get Proud By Practicing](#) by Laura Hershey
- [I Do Believe This Is...](#) by Savannah L. B.
- [On Our Backs We Will Carry Them](#) by Ari Ne'eman
- [Remarks at Day of Mourning 2015](#) by Alice Wong
- [No More](#) by Norman Kunc
- [Telling](#) by Laura Hershey
- [Remarks at the 2016 DC Vigil](#) by Zoe Gross
- [Remarks at the 2018 DC Vigil](#) by Julia Bascom

Self-Care and Next Steps Handouts

ASAN has made two handouts that you can distribute at the vigil. You can print out copies and hand them out or post them on the Facebook event. One handout outlines self-care steps that people can take after the vigil and the other gives ways that people can take action. If you are printing them out, it may be best to print one on one side of the paper and one on the other.

Next Steps

If you want to take action to prevent filicide and honor victims of filicide, here are some ways you can act in the future.

- **Read the Anti-Filicide Toolkit.** Download it at autisticadvocacy.org/anti-filicide. This toolkit is intended to provide advocates and allies with concrete tools and resources to use in their own communities, including in response to local incidents. The toolkit includes information about how to understand and respond to filicide, frequently asked questions about filicide, and a guidebook for Day of Mourning vigil site coordinators.
- **Connect with ASAN.** You can sign up for national action alert emails from the ASAN website. Go to autisticadvocacy.org/get-involved/newsletter/ to sign up. You can also find a list of our affiliate groups at autisticadvocacy.org/get-involved/affiliate-groups/. If there is an affiliate group near you, you can join them.
- **Educate yourself and others about abuse, domestic violence, hate crimes, and bias against people with disabilities.** Seek out resources on these topics to read and share with others. One resource is ASAN's Autism and Safety Toolkit, which you can find at <http://autisticadvocacy.org/policy/toolkits/safety/>
- **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.
- **Lobby your state legislature to include disability in your state's hate crimes statute, if it is not already.** You can ask your representatives and state government to insure that hate crimes based on disability are punished.

Self-Care

Attending a Day of Mourning vigil can stir strong emotions, and you might not know how to react or what to do afterwards. Here are some things you can do to help process what you're feeling:

- 1. Remember that your feelings are valid, whatever they are.** People experience events in different ways. Just because your experience is different than the person next to you, it doesn't mean either of you is wrong, reacting too much, or reacting too little.
- 2. Listen to your body.** If you need to cry, then cry. If you need to talk to someone, seek someone out who will listen. If you need to go somewhere to be alone for a while, do that.
- 3. Give yourself a break.** Vigils can be incredibly emotionally draining, and it's okay if you can't do things at full capacity for a while afterwards.
- 4. Take time for self-care.**
"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation." -Audre Lorde

What is self-care?

Self care is any intentional actions you take to care for your physical, mental and emotional health. Self-care looks different to everybody. All of these things could be self-care:

- creating art
- sensory and self-regulatory activities
- journaling
- writing blog posts on other things
- interacting with pets or getting support from service/support animals
- watching TV shows and movies
- watching funny videos on the Internet
- taking a nap without setting an alarm
- listening to a new podcast
- punching a pillow
- taking a long shower
- eating comfort foods
- going for a walk
- getting a massage
- coloring
- calling a friend just to say hi
- cuddling a stuffed animal
- writing a letter to somebody
- practicing yoga
- treating yourself to something nice
- taking a bubble bath
- watching a hockey game
- wearing an outfit that makes you feel good
- decluttering your room
- turning off your phone for a day
- swinging on a swingset
- reading your favorite book