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Bill Named in Memory of Lorna Breen, Doctor Who Died by Suicide on Frontline of Pandemic, Passes Congress



Almost two years since Lorna Breen died by suicide after becoming overwhelmed working on the front lines of the pandemic, a bill named in her memory to boost mental health resources for health-care workers is headed to the president's desk.

Breen's family in Virginia had spent months advocating for strengthening federal resources to fight burnout, prevent suicide and raise awareness about depression and other mental health issues among overburdened health-care workers who have had little relief during wave after wave of the pandemic. On Thursday night, the [Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act](#) — championed by Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) — passed the Senate on a voice vote.

"This is a huge recognition to all those who have been working so tirelessly on our behalf that we see you, and we hear you, and we are actually working hard to help you and to support you,"

said Corey Feist, Breen's brother-in-law and the co-founder of the [Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation](#). "On a more personal level, Lorna cared so deeply about her colleagues ... This law passing is an extension of her caring for her colleagues in the deepest possible way."

Breen had been treating [coronavirus](#) patients in a New York City emergency room at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, when hospital beds there were flooded with patients and deaths skyrocketed. Breen came down with the virus herself and returned to work after taking minimal time to recover, but soon she appeared withdrawn. Her family encouraged her to come home to Charlottesville to take a break and to seek mental health treatment.

Despite having no history of mental illness, [she died by suicide shortly after returning to Virginia](#).

At the time she died, she had recently [co-authored a paper](#) on the "alarming prevalence" of burnout among emergency-room clinicians. And while Breen had never showed signs of burnout herself, her family fears she, like countless other health-care workers, was silently enduring the burdens of her work and resisted seeking mental health help — fearing professional repercussions.

When her family helped Breen seek treatment, "Lorna thought she was going to lose her license to practice medicine in New York because she got mental health treatment one time in her life," Feist said, noting that she believed this so strongly even though it was contrary to the law. "She articulated that to us from her hospital bed at UVA that she was going to lose her license to practice medicine."

Feist and his wife, Breen's sister Jennifer Breen Feist, created the foundation after a "collective cry for help" from health-care workers following Breen's death, and soon began working with Kaine on the legislation in her name.

Along with a national awareness campaign, the bill also provides federal grants to health-care providers to develop treatment and peer-support programs as well as to train employees about strategies to cope with mental health issues, substance abuse and to prevent suicide.

Kaine said the bill's journey through Congress was unusual given that funding for those grant programs were provided in the American Rescue Plan last year before the Lorna Breen legislation had passed. The Department of Health and Human Services began distributing more than \$100 million in grants to health-care providers across the country, [including three in Virginia, last month](#).

Kaine said the passage of the bill will provide a permanent framework to continue supporting health-care workers long after the pandemic subsidies.

"This Breen bill deals with a problem that was acute before covid, but that is going to have a very long consequence once covid is in the rearview mirror, and it is about ultimately what Jennifer and Corey want: They really want a culture change," Kaine said in an interview Friday.

Part of Breen's family's work through the foundation has centered on ensuring state regulations do not in any way suggest that health-care workers could be penalized for revealing their mental health history, and communicating to health-care workers that it's okay to seek help. Feist cited a recent [Medscape survey of 13,000 physicians](#) in which 43 percent said the reason they had not sought help for burnout or depression was because they "don't want to risk disclosure to the medical board." Another quarter said they were concerned colleagues would find out.

Feist said one particularly important piece of the Breen legislation is that it also provides for a comprehensive study of the prevalence and causes of burnout and mental health struggles among health-care workers, which Feist said he hopes will illuminate more state and federal policy needs.

"When we created [the Lorna Breen legislation], it was the beginning of the pandemic," Feist said. "The mental health impact of the pandemic on the workforce has now magnified significantly, which means we are literally just getting started here from a policy perspective in supporting the well-being of the workforce."

If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255). You can also text a crisis counselor by messaging the Crisis Text Line at 741741.