

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Lizzie's Law

We all remember the shocking news story. Holly Thompson was murdered in her parents' home. She had moved there with her three year old daughter after a separation from her spouse. Her daughter Elizabeth, known to all as Lizzie, had watched the killing. Her estranged husband Charles Thompson was soon charged and convicted of the crime and he is serving a life sentence in prison. But the conviction did not end the nightmare for Holly's family.

From prison Charles Thompson petitioned the court to confer visitation rights and require Lizzie's grandparents to have the little girl visit him at the prison.

An ordinary person shudders at the prospect at such a court order, and indeed the judge refused to order the visits. Nonetheless, the specter of continuing requests and court appearances and the fear that a different judge might rule differently in a future hearing haunted Lizzie's family.

Representative Paul Caron became interested in the plight of the family at that point, worked with other legislators to draft a law that would protect Lizzie and any other child in a similar situation. The law, passed this month, states that a parent who is convicted of first degree murder of the other parent loses parental rights to any children. That parent does not have standing to demand visitation rights against the will of the child.

The bill was introduced this spring, with co-sponsorship of 119 legislators. It also had the support of more than 26,000 signers of a petition that circulated throughout the region and state. Little Lizzie Thompson delivered a wagonload of petitions to a Boston press conference. The bill then had a hearing in Boston, with Lizzie's grandparents and cousin testifying in support. Wording of the proposed statute was adjusted to assure constitutionality and consider ways in which it might be applied in the future to other circumstances.

As the process advanced, Rep. Caron began to receive inquiries from legislators in other states. Backers of the Massachusetts bill have appeared on national television shows as varied as Good Morning America and Johnny Cochran's program on Court TV. Eleven states have now introduced versions of the law to date.

The Massachusetts bill passed both houses of the legislature with unanimous votes, and on August 15, in West Springfield, Governor Paul Cellucci signed the bill into law.

I accompanied Governor Cellucci to the signing, having first attended the graduation in Springfield of 41 new police officers. It was a sobering transition from the celebration of the new law enforcement to the reality that police had not been able to protect Holly Thompson. But by the end of the day an extra measure of protection had been provided to her daughter. Lizzie can now go home with her grandparents and live the life an ordinary little girl.