

From Katherine Morris to Nolan Wells: The NAACP Issues a Call for National Standards, Transparency and Accountability “On the Crisis Of Death Misclassifications by Medical Examiners and Coroners Across the United States”



For families who unexpectedly lose a loved one, grief is difficult enough. But when the official explanation of a death leaves unanswered questions, families can find themselves confronting another burden: fighting the very systems entrusted with determining how their loved one died.

The deaths of **Nolan Xavier Wells in Mississippi** and **Katherine Sarah Morris in Maryland** occurred fourteen years apart, under very different circumstances. Yet the experiences of their families raise a common question with national implications: **What recourse does a family have when it does not have confidence in the investigation or the official determination of a loved one's death?**

Nolan Xavier Wells, a 18-year-old college football player, who disappeared during a July 4, 2026 trip with friends. His body was discovered two days later. As questions mounted about the circumstances surrounding his death, his parents, Christine and Elmore Wonsley, sought an **independent autopsy** rather than relying solely upon the original examination. The independent examination, conducted by former Washington, D.C., Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Roger Mitchell, listed both the cause and manner of death as **undetermined pending further investigation**.

The family's search for answers reached the national stage on July 22, when civil rights attorney Ben Crump announced the independent findings during the **117th NAACP National Convention in Chicago**, alongside Wells' parents and NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson.

At that same **117th NAACP National Convention**, delegates confronted the broader national problem underlying concerns raised by families such as the Wells and Morris'. **Resolution No. 14, “On the Crisis of Death Misclassifications by Medical Examiners and Coroners Across the United States: A Call for National Standards, Transparency, and Accountability,”** was presented by the **Anne Arundel County, Maryland Branch of the NAACP**, and adopted by the national organization. The resolution called for stronger national standards, greater transparency and accountability and urged states across the nation to enact legislation modeled after Maryland's **Katherine Morris Death Reclassification Act of 2024**. The convergence was striking as one family stood before the national convention

seeking answers about a disputed death investigation, after having requested the autopsy be done by a more independent agency than that of the state of Mississippi itself, NAACP delegates were simultaneously advancing a national policy response intended to help families confronting those very concerns.

For Maryland families, the struggle surrounding Wells may sound painfully familiar.

Katherine Sarah Morris, a 22-year-old University of Maryland student, was found dead inside her vehicle near Arundel Mills in Anne Arundel County on May 6, 2012. The Maryland Office of the Chief Medical Examiner determined that she died from carbon monoxide intoxication from charcoal grills lit in her car and classified the manner of death as suicide. Her mother, Marguerite Morris, challenged that conclusion and the adequacy and independence of the investigation. Testimony later submitted to the Maryland General Assembly stated that the suicide determination had been made within approximately 48 hours, and a retired police chief certified an expert in death scene investigations, would later testify, that police had mishandled the death scene because of the faulty suicide ruling.

The Morris family spent years pursuing Maryland's administrative-review process. Ultimately, following an independent administrative hearing, Katherine's manner of death was changed from **suicide to undetermined**. Her case is now publicly listed by Anne Arundel County Police among its cold cases.

That long struggle produced something larger than one family's case.

In 2024, Maryland enacted the **Katherine Morris Death Reclassification Act**. The law requires action when a death certificate's manner of death is changed or corrected to undetermined or homicide, including notification of prosecutors and law enforcement and the reopening or reinvestigation of the death by law enforcement. The legislation passed the Maryland House 135-0 and Senate 47-0.

The issue extends far beyond Maryland and Mississippi.

Differences matter because a determination of **suicide, accident, homicide or undetermined** can profoundly affect what happens next. It can influence whether police continue investigating, whether additional evidence is pursued and whether a grieving family ever receives another opportunity to ask questions.

The parallel between Nolan Wells and Katherine Morris is therefore not that the circumstances of their deaths are identical. They are not. Nor does questioning an official determination establish that a crime occurred. Rather, their stories illuminate what happens when grieving families believe important questions remain unanswered and must navigate complicated systems simply to obtain further review.

For the Morris family, that journey took years and ultimately helped change Maryland law. Today, the impact of that struggle has moved beyond Maryland: the law bearing Katherine's name is now being held up through a nationally adopted NAACP resolution as a legislative model for other states.

For the Wells family, the journey for answers continues.

And for the NAACP and impacted families across America, the larger question remains: **Should a family's ability to obtain transparency, independent review and meaningful reconsideration of a disputed death depend upon the state, or even the county, in which their loved one died?**

The experiences of these families, and the action taken at the 117th NAACP National Convention demonstrate why the national conversation about **consistent standards, independent death investigations, transparency and accountability** is no longer simply about individual cases. It is becoming a call for systemic change.

This discussion will continue at the planned FACTS (Families Accountability Collaboration and Transparency) Regional Legislative Symposium, scheduled for April 18–22, 2027. The event is sponsored in part by For.Kathy's.Sake and Families.for.Transparency. For more information, email Thefacts2027@gmail.com.

Submitted by Rev Marguerite Morris