

I am Heather Simcakoski, the wife/widow of Jason Simcakoski and mother of our now 13 year old daughter Anaya Simcakoski. Jason I met while both serving on active duty in the United States Marine Corps and later settled in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where we currently reside.

By passing this law, we protect our most courageous and honored citizens – our veterans, their families and our communities. I cannot think of anything more important or valuable than saving lives – veteran's lives. The moment we even consider putting the cost of passing a law before the lives of our veterans is the moment we have confirmed that America values money more than human lives – all veteran's lives. It tells us our country valued money more than it valued Jason's life – my family's life.

In August of 2014, I physically lost my husband to what we now know was caused by mixed drug toxicity (a lethal combination of drugs prescribed to him while inpatient at the Tomah VA). However, I actually began "losing" my husband long before that.

For years I watched Jason being prescribed insanely large amounts of medications along with extremely high doses. I never could understand why someone who originally checked in for an opioid addiction would be prescribed these medications or the amount of medication (dosages) he was given; however, it was the side effects of the medication that confirmed something was terribly wrong with their proposed treatment plan,

We watched Jason go from an honorable overachieving United States Marine to someone we barely knew. Throughout the years we watched Jason struggle to complete very basic tasks, due to the side effects of the medication. We watched Jason fall asleep at the wheel of the car – driving up on the median, one time ending up in a ditch, as well as many times watching him nod off at the wheel. There were times when Jason would sleep nearly all day – every day for weeks at a time. He would miss very important family events such as sports games for his daughter, holiday events, and even his grandfather's funeral. He would have significant mood swings and at times could barely speak clearly as his words were slurred. At times he would spend weeks in the Tomah VA seeking help, yet it seemed like many times he would only continue to come home with large quantities and doses of medications.

We watched Jason's health deteriorate right before our eyes, eventually impacting his overall health and ability to function in society. He was no longer dependable to work full-time, he refused to go in most stores and his ability to interact with friends and family was taken away, due to the impact of the medications both mentally and physically causing significant difficulties in our family life. We could no longer rely on Jason's ability to function or perform any task.

It was almost a celebratory moment if we were able to get him to leave the house to participate in any family event – even if it was just going to dinner on a Friday night. Anaya and I had to learn to plan on him not being awake or able to participate in any plans we made – as he was mentally and physically no longer able to commit to even the simplest of things.

I watched him hurt because he did not want to be like that, as well as the suffering it was causing his relationship with his daughter and I. ultimately causing Jason to die a very slow, and miserable death.

I feel all of this was avoidable. I would encourage anyone prescribing a patient these medications or any other similar cocktail of medications to spend a full 24-48 hours with the individual. It will not only break your heart but completely justify the reason we need to change the way these medications are prescribed. Simply checking on an individual or spending a little bit of time with them here and there checking on them will never show the full picture of the destruction caused to the individuals, families and society by over-prescribing.