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## 'It is overwhelming': Daughters testify in support of Texas bill filed in response to Chemirmir case

Police say the women's mothers were probably victims of the serial-murder suspect. Now, families are urging Texas legislators to pass measures to improve safety in senior-living homes.



Cheryl Pangburn (left) and Shannon Dion hug after testifying before the House Committee on Public Health in Austin on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. The two are co-founders of the nonprofit Secure Our Seniors' Safety. (Juan Figueroa)

By [Charles Scudder](#)  
6:33 PM on Mar 17, 2021



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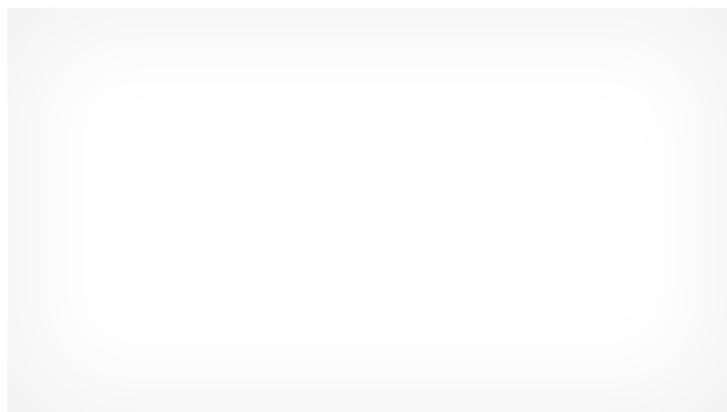


AUSTIN — Arm in arm, heels clicking down the marble floors of the Texas Capitol as they walked toward a hearing of the House Committee on Public Health, Shannon Dion and Cheryl Pangburn worried that the legislators wouldn't hear their message.

For years, they've tried to raise an alarm. For years, they said, no one has listened.

**Dion was always suspicious about how her mother, Doris Gleason, died in October 2016, but she was brushed off by police, property managers and news reporters alike.** Pangburn also had lingering questions after her mother, Marilyn Bixler, died in September 2017, but for months after she learned the truth through Facebook, she couldn't get police to give her a straight answer.

ADVERTISING



Investigators now say both women's mothers were killed by Billy Chemirmir, who is charged with 18 counts of capital murder and two counts of attempted capital murder in Dallas and Collin counties. Police say he targeted women in independent-living communities and their own homes, smothering them with pillows and stealing jewelry, cash and other valuables to sell.

"You don't wake up in the mornings without thinking of it," Dion said.

"It's with us every day, and you get used to that flow," Pangburn said. "Then you're in Austin testifying and it hits you."



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Cheryl Pangburn holds the door for Shannon Dion as they enter Austin's John H. Reagan State Office Building, near the Capitol, to testify before the House Committee on Public Health on Wednesday. (Juan Figueroa)

Within days of learning what had happened, Dion and Pangburn say, both wanted to find a silver lining — something good to come from their horror, something to make sure no one else would go through it, too. They and other relatives of the dead founded the nonprofit **Secure Our Seniors' Safety** to **raise awareness about the slayings and pressure lawmakers** to pass laws aimed at improving security at senior-living communities.

Now, after countless late-night calls with each other and Zoom meetings with lawmakers, Pangburn and Dion were finally in Austin, talking to legislators, asking them to listen.

Long before the pandemic, Dion had envisioned crowds of families marching on the Capitol. There would've been rallies and matching T-shirts. Grieving daughters and sons would have sat quietly in hearing rooms and legislative chambers in a symbolic show of their collective grief and anger.

Instead, Wednesday morning before dawn, Dion and Pangburn shared a quiet Lyft ride to the Capitol grounds for a House committee meeting on a simple, five-paragraph bill.



Dion (left) and Pangburn enter the hearing room at the Reagan building. (Juan Figueroa)

State Rep. Jared Patterson, R-Frisco, had asked them to testify in support of the bill, which he filed after [The Dallas Morning News reported that Pangburn](#) had learned not from law enforcement but through a Facebook friend that her mother was possibly a victim. The women were given the option to testify over Zoom, Dion said, but both wanted to make their case in person.

“We still are mourning and sad, but our early conversations were about doing good and making change,” Dion said. “This is a big step in us actually making change.”

The bill would require officials to notify next of kin if a death certificate is amended. Such a circumstance is rare. Patterson said Wednesday that the law would affect just 3,000 death certificates each year across the state.

In the committee room, a quiet space with noise-canceling paneling and rows of green chairs, Dion and Pangburn stood reading over the agenda for the day. Patterson’s bill, HB 723, was second on the list.



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BY DALLAS MORNING NEWS EDITORIAL OPINION

Dion looked toward the dais and took a deep breath.

“Wanna go sit down?” Pangburn said.

“Yeah,” Dion said. They linked arms and found seats near the front.

## Lack of notification

If convicted, Chemirmir could face the death penalty. He is in the Dallas County jail with bail set at \$17.6 million and has said he is innocent.

Officials originally attributed the deaths to natural causes, despite suspicions and complaints filed by families, who also had concerns about missing valuables. It wasn't until March 2018, after Chemirmir's arrest, that police began reinvestigating hundreds of unattended deaths in North Texas.

Among the cases under investigation is that of Bixler, who was found dead at the Parkview in Frisco senior-living community.



Dion (left) and Pangburn take their seats for Wednesday's hearing in the the John H. Reagan State Office Building in Austin. (Juan Figueroa)

Pangburn long had questions about her mother's death but had tried to move past them.

Then, in March 2019, a high school friend sent her a message on Facebook, expressing condolences and saying she'd seen Bixler's name on a list of Chemirmir's possible victims.

Pangburn had never heard of Chemirmir. Police had already decided her mother was probably a victim, and the medical examiner had changed her cause of death from "natural causes" to "undetermined."

But no one had notified Pangburn or her family.

"I was told there must have been some miscommunication," Pangburn said at Wednesday's hearing.

## Suite of bills filed

Patterson's bill is part of a suite of legislation **filed last week in response to the killings**. The measures call for increased security at senior-living communities and for enforcement of existing regulations on cash-for-gold shops like the ones where police say Chemirmir sold stolen valuables.

Wednesday's hearing was among the first steps on one of the more minor bills. Like most of the others introduced by North Texas lawmakers in response to the case, the measure has bipartisan support in the House and Senate.



CRIME

**Police didn't tell her they believed Billy Chemirmir killed her mom in 2017. She learned on Facebook**

BY CHARLES SCUDDER

Committee members had only one question for Patterson: How would notification of next of kin be delivered? (Patterson said that the bill calls for written notification and that how to do it would be up to individual agencies.)

For Pangburn and Dion, the chance to step to the podium and tell their story meant more.

“This bill addresses a specific problem that came up in our tragic story,” Dion said. “It is overwhelming.”

## ‘It’s so unfathomable’

The night before the House hearing, the women had met for dinner on Austin’s popular Sixth Street.

Pangburn adjusted her mask while they waited for a table. Sometimes, when the mask keeps her from taking a deep breath, she thinks she’s suffocating. She said she thinks of her mother in those moments, and the method by which police say Chemirmir killed elderly people.

“I can’t do that. I can’t think about my mother’s last moments,” Dion said. “At this point, my focus is legislation. I’m anxious about the trial because I’ll have to mourn my mother.”

“There’s work to be done between now and then,” Pangburn said.



Pangburn testifies before the committee. (Juan Figueroa)

Chemirmir’s criminal trial, currently scheduled to begin in early April, is expected to be delayed significantly in part because of the pandemic. In the meantime, Pangburn and Dion said, the families’ focus is on the legislative session, which is set to end in May.

“The thing that is still the strangest about all this is ... when you say the name Marilyn Bixler, *murder* and *serial killer* in the same sentence,” Pangburn said. “It’s so unfathomable.”

“It still is,” Dion said. “I can say it, but when I sit back and say, ‘Did this really happen to Mama?’”

## ‘You gave me a voice’



“But there are 253 more counties in Texas without this policy,” Dion said in her own testimony. “HB 723 is simple, short, budget-neutral to Texas taxpayers, and should mandate authorities do the right thing.”

The women spoke slowly and carefully. Both drifted from prepared remarks, each talking for several minutes about her experiences and why she believes the bill is so necessary.

“I think you’ve heard some powerful testimony today,” Patterson said to close, his voice catching as he asked his colleagues to vote favorably on the bill.

Committee members kept the bill marked as pending, meaning they would vote later, possibly next week, to move it to the full House.



Pangburn and Patterson (right) embrace after testimony. “You don’t know how much it means to be heard,” Dion (left) told Patterson. (Juan Figueroa)

When the committee chair moved on to the next bill, Pangburn, Dion and Patterson left the hearing room. They held each other, weeping softly, in the lobby of the state office building.

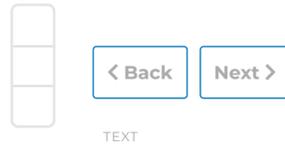
“You don’t know how much it means to be heard,” Dion told Patterson. “You gave me a voice today.”

Dion’s and Pangburn’s heels clicked down the hallway as they left the building. Pangburn, Dion and Patterson stepped outside to pose for pictures, the sun glittering off the red granite dome of the Capitol. They know they may be back soon, called to support the other bills, but taking the first step, Dion said, was a relief.

“There were so many times where we were screaming and no one heard,” she said. “Today, legislators heard us.”

## Timeline of the Billy Chemirmir case

Follow the trail of alleged victims and how law enforcement pieced together the case with this timeline. This timeline will be updated as more information becomes available.



Taylor Johnston and Charles Scudder / DMN



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