

Laura Levis died of a catastrophic asthma attack, just steps from the Somerville Hospital and one of Somerville's Fire Stations. All of us around this horseshoe – and many of you in the audience and at home – have read the article her husband, Peter DeMarco, wrote about Laura that appeared in the Globe this past week.

Laura was a 34-year-old journalist living in Somerville. She had just received a promotion in her job at the Harvard Gazette. Peter describes her as funny, confident, and extremely smart. She loved to travel and was an amazing athlete with incredible physical (and mental) strength.

On that day in September, Laura walked to the Somerville Hospital Emergency room very early in the morning, because she knew she was experiencing an asthma attack. She found the Emergency Room doors that she went to were locked with no apparent way to get in. She called 911 and was connected to the State Police call center. As 911 operators tried to determine where she was outside the hospital and direct assistance, Laura lost consciousness. Help was on the way, but as Peter describes, due to gaps in geo-locating technology for 911 calls from cell phones, first responders did not know exactly where to look for Laura and initially did not find her. As described by Peter, by the time the first responders found Laura, she had gone without oxygen for so long that she did not recover brain activity once she received emergency treatment.

Maybe even more so because it seems like it was so preventable, this story is absolutely heart-breaking. The people who loved Laura replay what happened over and over. As Peter points out in his article, any one of many small differences in system design (or chance) would have meant a completely different outcome. We are grateful to Peter for telling this story. In his grief, he has looked for remedies so that others may not experience this overwhelming loss.

We as a community – and we as a country – will need to take Peter's advice and figure out how to improve our incredibly complicated and broken health care systems, where there are ANY emergency rooms that are considered the wrong place to go to receive life-saving care.

At a community care network, like Cambridge Health Alliance, we know that the vast majority of providers and staff are there because they have a strong sense of mission. (Here's just one story about mission... My family are all Cambridge Health Alliance patients. Once, when I was with my then four-year-old son Joey at the Cambridge Hospital Emergency room, I could hear a family behind the curtain next to us. The nurse or doctor, speaking through a phone-based interpreter, talked to a toddler's mom who had just come from El Salvador. The clinician had no access to the child's medical records, so they were trying to figure out what treatment to give the little girl.) We know that the Cambridge Health Alliance is the first line of defense for many for the management of both acute and chronic conditions (maybe, ironically) like asthma. We need to fix systems and funding to help those providers carry out their mission for everyone, including patients who have no other options. Note that today's Globe reports that the Cambridge Health Alliance, on behalf of Somerville Hospital, issued a statement apologizing for not meeting their own standards for transparency and accountability.

As with CHA clinicians and staff, we know that our first responders, like E911, Fire Alarm, Cataldo, Somerville Police, and Somerville Fire handle very confusing, life-and-death, situations often. (This is especially true with the recent increase in opioid overdoses, where the minutes required for administration of Narcan mean the difference between life and death.) First responders are haunted by a situation like this – the very worst kind of missed opportunity. Also, while this example is so pointed, it's also a reminder that there are missed opportunities and lives lost due to system failures in other key government systems, like education and criminal justice.

Peter's telling of Laura's story is a call to all of us who are in positions of policy making at all levels to dedicate and re-dedicate ourselves to improving systems – even the sometimes dry and complex ones like health care and GPS technology – because they matter in the most profound ways. We want to express appreciation to Peter for his willingness to share this most personal story to make our community and ones like it better. And most of all, we want to honor Laura. She made a profound mark on the people around her, and leaves behind so much grief for all the missed opportunities in her future.

Last month, we shared a moment of silence for the loss of ten-year-old Jahmai Furtado-Cooper. Jahmai also died of an asthma attack just a month after Laura died and just a short distance away. We want their lives lived and their lives lost to matter. We want to pursue solutions with the passion that these two young people lived their lives – as a way to honor the unimaginable loss of lives ended far too soon.