

## Matthew Tully: Here's an essential conversation after IU student's death

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The details surrounding the recent death of an Indiana University freshman are unclear, and it's too early to know whether Indiana's Lifeline Law has any relevance to the tragedy.

But for Sen. Jim Merritt, the author of the Lifeline legislation, the conversation that followed the heartbreaking tale was another reminder that too many people, too many young people, don't understand or even know about the law.

They don't know that it provides certain immunities from prosecution for those who seek emergency care for friends who have taken in dangerous levels of alcohol. They don't know that others have fought in the halls of the Statehouse to make sure young people have a better chance of making the right decisions.

Again, the IU case may or may not be relevant here. Initial reports say friends of the incoming freshman knew about the law and simply didn't realize she needed medical help after falling down a flight of stairs. The young woman's parents have inspired Central Indiana with their almost unimaginable grace, and disinterest in finger-pointing, in this moment of tragedy.

But the story has nonetheless shined a light on the law, and that's good, because it can save lives and more people need to know about it. Merritt, who championed the law along with an impressive grass-roots coalition of students and others, has spent months speaking to students across the state, trying to make sure they know that every minute is crucial when a friend is in physical danger.

"There are mistakes that people make that underscore the idea that sometimes the law has to be gray," Merritt said. "The law has to have a common-sense bent to it, and it has to understand that people do make mistakes."

You can read all about the law at [indianalifeline.org](http://indianalifeline.org). Essentially, it provides immunity for those who call 911 or seek other emergency help for someone who "is suffering from an alcohol-related health emergency." The immunity covers a series of misdemeanors such as public intoxication, minor possession, minor consumption and minor transportation — if the callers stay on the scene and cooperate.

(It's a good law; if you have a teenager or young adult in your family, please take a minute today to let them know about it.)

Before we talked about the law Monday, Merritt shook his head and struggled to find the right words to say about the death of Rachael Fiege, a 19-year-old who graduated from Zionsville High School this spring and arrived in Bloomington for her first semester last week.

We are both dads, and we sat for a while talking about the horror of sending your child off to college and then getting that phone call.

In the early hours after the news broke, many wondered whether the student's friends and acquaintances hadn't called 911 sooner out of fear of legal consequences. It now looks as if that wasn't the case. But

Merritt realized that many people knew nothing about the Lifeline Law, though he has spent countless hours talking and preaching about it.

When one friend on Facebook asked a basic question that made clear he didn't understand the law, Merritt grew frustrated. He took to Twitter, releasing a series of tweets detailing the law.

"At some point you just don't feel like you're breaking through," he said. "I wanted to capture some attention. I wanted people to hear about this law because it can save lives."

Merritt has worked hard in recent years on a series of laws aimed at the dangers facing young people. He has spent many nights on the road, visiting far-away towns and cities to talk with students and parents about the laws.

"A lot of times we don't do a good job, after we pass a law, of telling people about it," he said.

With that in mind, he is looking at different ways of getting the word out about the Lifeline Law. He is pushing college administrators to include a discussion of it in freshman orientation events, as Butler University did over the weekend. He also has secured an agreement from Big Red Liquors, a major liquor store in some college towns, to help spread the word. He's working to infiltrate social media with the message.

"It's a continual process of finding the vein into their world, and it's constantly changing," he said. "And this never ends. Every year there will be that 17-year-old that we need to reach, that we need to educate."

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