

Testimony for HB1344 Mental Hygiene – Reform of Laws and delivery of Services

House Health and Government Operations Committee

Date: March 19, 2021

From: Jennay Ghowrwal, Montgomery County (District 19)

POSITION: SUPPORT

Thank you for the opportunity to share my family's story with you today. From my experiences as a caregiver, a clearer standard for involuntary commitment would offer meaningful reform of what I have experienced as an unyielding system filled with obstacles for those of us trying desperately to help our loved ones.

My mother, a 70-year-old Montgomery County resident, suffered from paranoid delusions due to late-onset schizophrenia. She began to develop recognizable signs of mental illness about 15 years ago, and then deteriorated to the point where she could not maintain employment and relied completely on my brother and me for financial support. Guided by beliefs that the C.I.A. is torturing her and controlling everyone around her, my mother consistently refused any form of treatment we proposed. Acute moments of paranoia led our mother to threaten my brother and me, and we realized in 2009 that in addition to her inability to meet her basic needs without our help, she could act on her delusional thoughts, whether against us or herself, more likely the latter. When we petitioned a court for involuntary commitment, the judge said she did not meet the standard for danger to herself or others. The same was true when we called Montgomery County's crisis response team when she returned from a sudden week-long disappearance the next summer.

When we finally were able to have our mother involuntarily committed, in 2011, it was after she threw a lit match onto the floor during an argument about money she wanted for a haircut. My brother and I were there to step on the match and call the police, but what we saw shook us.

We gained from our mother's hospitalization a way to access SNAP and Social Security benefits on her behalf, because she refused to accept them herself.

I believe that meaningful change must include a definition of dangerousness in Maryland's standard for involuntary commitment that considers an inability to recognize one's illness and to seek care, and an inability to satisfy one's basic survival needs. I urge you to support these changes so that my mother and others may have a chance to recover before being forced into crisis.