

HB 0029 – IN SUPPORT

Health - Standards for Involuntary Admissions and Petitions for
Emergency Evaluation - Substance Use Disorder

Jimena DeChant

11421 Maid at Arms Lane

Berlin, MD 21811

Jimenaryan@verizon.net

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My name is Jimena DeChant

Five years ago I attended a FED UP RALLY in Washington, DC with a number of moms whom I have come to call my SOUL SISTERS, since joining the Club from Hell in 2015.

S.O.U.L. (Surviving Our Ultimate Loss) is a private peer support network of bereaved moms who have lost a son or a daughter to overdose. Some of our members have lost their only child and some have lost more than one. What started with five Montgomery County, MD moms in 2015, including myself, has grown to hundreds of members as overdose in Maryland alone continues to claim 2000 lives each year. Despite the decline we saw in 2019, for the first time in a decade, the number of overdoses this year will be worse than ever. The pandemic has made people with drug addictions even more vulnerable.

At the FED UP RALLY I met a mom from Kentucky. Her name was Charlotte Wethington, and she had also lost her son to overdose. Soon after he died she went on to spearhead the involuntary commitment law in her state known as Casey's Law. There were thousands of people at the event but I noticed her immediately standing under a huge banner passing out information about the law. Her banner stopped me in my tracks and made my heart skip a beat, for you see – my son's name was also Casey. My sweet boy, Casey Patrick Ryan, born on St Patrick's Day in 1989 died on January 30, 2015 of fentanyl overdose.

I so admired how Charlotte was there, standing in her own grief, and trying to help other desperate families save their kids. I wondered about her son's journey and what our Casey's might have had in common, besides their drug use and premature death.

My own grief was very fresh and I was focused on surviving myself and helping other S.O.U.L. moms deal with their overwhelming despair. Charlotte educated me about her law and at the time the only thing I could say to her was – HOW I WISHED I HAD MET HER SOONER. How I wished I had felt more empowered to save my son. It had been a challenge to keep Casey in treatment long enough to make a difference. In hindsight, I realize how much better it would have been for him to have received treatment and worked his recovery closer to home, near the family and the community he loved, rather than always being sent away. Not long before he died, Casey helped me realize this.

My Casey had struggled with addiction since he was in middle school and we had always relied on out-of-state treatment programs because we thought it would be easier to enforce his treatment with him far away, but as a result he was never able to reintegrate and felt a growing sense of disconnection and lack of belonging in his community.

Addicts who have made it long term have told me that addiction is a disease of the mind which becomes a disease of the body when cravings are fed and also a disease of the spirit. I don't think this can be overstated. I do believe that enforcing treatment long enough for the brain to heal coupled with sustained support, understanding, presence and love from family and friends is what gives those struggling the best chance to recover.

Charlotte has said:

"Families who have filed a Casey's Law petition have done so only in desperate situations, after multiple overdose and the loss of home, job, children, car, self-esteem and hope. The only thing to lose is their loved one's life. That is the right the family is trying to protect – their loved ones right to live."

States who have similar laws vary on how long an individual must be civilly committed. The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, widely regarded as a leader in evidence-based addiction treatment, and where my Casey went for treatment, says, “Addiction is like other chronic illnesses in that the sooner it is recognized and the longer it is treated, the better chances of recovery.” Only one state, Kentucky, permits an individual to be involuntarily committed to treatment for up to a year. The mom from Kentucky knew what she was doing.

With opioid use disorder, people are a danger to themselves because every use could be the last one. It is like Russian roulette. A person must be alive to recover and we must do whatever it takes to ensure recovery remains possible. Charlotte, like me, learned the hard way. When she told me “Recovery is not a matter of getting it. It’s a matter of healing the brain, which takes time. Involuntary laws can help us keep people in treatment for the length of time needed to do that,” I knew she knew what she was talking about.

Please help us. Vote YES for HB29. Thank you.