

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

House Health and Government Operations Committee

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From: Susan Kneller, Rockville, MD. Montgomery County

Position: SUPPORT

I have volunteered in the past, for 22 years, answering the NAMI Montgomery County helpline for families with a loved one with mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. I am submitting this testimony as an individual, not on behalf of any organization.

The danger standard for psychiatric evaluation and involuntary hospitalization has been a barrier to critically needed treatment. It has prevented many families from getting treatment for their loved ones, who are unable to recognize that they are ill and need treatment, before the tragic outcomes that result from denial of treatment, including violence, homelessness, and incarceration.

The function of the Helpline is to try to put callers in touch with resources that will help them. Our NIGHTMARE CALLER, of which I have answered **many**, is the person who is watching a family member with Serious Mental Illness deteriorating in front of their eyes because he or she refuses treatment, because they are unable, because of their illness to recognize they are ill. Very often, the ill person is frightening and abusive to family members.

We cannot help them since Maryland's standard for emergency petition is generally interpreted in our county by the police, judges, crisis team as requiring imminent overt dangerous behavior, such as a threat or violence. Often by then it is too late. A crime has been committed or someone is harmed.

What is wrong with this picture? HB1344 would change the picture so that a very ill person could receive treatment BEFORE someone is harmed or they become homeless or incarcerated.

Some who oppose HB1344 want to protect everyone's civil liberties, unless they present an *imminent* danger. But when the cost of that idea is violence and unbearable family disruption, we need to rethink our strategies and re-write some laws. Clarifying that the "dangerousness" standard for emergency petition and involuntary commitment includes those who cannot care for themselves or suffering psychiatric deterioration and are reasonably expected to become a danger to self or others would be a good beginning. Providing treatment to those with severe illness who cannot understand they are ill, can restore their rational thought and ability to exercise their civil rights and is the only humane path to follow.

HB1344 would make it possible for families to get help before harm is done. I strongly urge that this bill be the new law in Maryland!