

Testimony for HB1017

March 9, 2022, 1:00 PM, House Health and Government Operations Committee

From: Sue Daniels, Bethesda

Position: FAVORABLE

A Once-Promising Young Life Without Hope because Maryland has no AOT

Our son had a bright future, with a job that he loved as a lead software developer at a Fortune 500 corporation. He had close friends and a steady relationship with a wonderful young woman. Entirely through his own earnings and savings, he had a nice apartment and a car. We were so happy for him. Then, suddenly, at the end of his twenties, he became ill with schizophrenia and lost everything, even his future, through no fault of his own. He lost his job, his friends, his girlfriend, all his possessions, and without the help of his parents, would have become homeless. In his psychotic state, he has unwittingly done things that were very dangerous to himself and others, and is currently facing a trial for breaking fire safety laws. He has been hospitalized repeatedly, but because Maryland has failed to pass AOT protections for people stricken with severe mental illness, he has never received the treatment he desperately needs. We have begged the doctors to treat him, but they say their hands are tied without a change in the law, and that they cannot treat him unless he consents, even though he is not capable of understanding his disease and consenting until after he is treated. It's a Catch-22.

When a person is psychotic, their thinking is confused, and usually the person doesn't realize they are ill and so they won't take the medication they urgently need. Instead, in the case of our son, he knows only that his life has become a shambles, that he is lonely and miserable, and that "I can't do the things I used to be able to do." In his despair, he has attempted suicide. Our family lives in constant fear of him killing himself before the law changes and he can get treated. Whenever he doesn't answer our text messages, we miss work, drop everything and drive to his apartment, terrified of what we may find on the other side of the door. It is ongoing hell for him and for the whole family.

Feeling alone and tormented, he is afraid to take medication that would help him wake up from this nightmare. Alas, he believes his confusion and the horrible malignant voices he hears in his head are caused by a conspiracy of evil beings who are controlling him with radio waves. His young brain, once so nimble and strong, is being ravaged year after year by the flames of psychosis. Science tells us that the sooner you treat psychosis, the more likely the person will be able to return to a more normal life. The longer this evil disease is neglected, the more it destroys the brain. Despite all our efforts to get our beloved son treated, it has now been

nearly 8 years that he has been suffering without treatment – because Maryland is one of the last three states in America that has failed to pass AOT.

As parents, we are now begging you, our lawmakers, to help our son and thousands of other afflicted young Marylanders who need and deserve help. Nearly 1% of Marylanders suffer from schizophrenia. Another 2-3% suffer from other forms of psychotic illness. This is also an issue of public safety. People who are left to suffer the ravages of psychosis without any rational intervention of compassionate antipsychotic treatment can be a danger to others. My son has struggled against evil voices for years, voices that command him to do terrible things. He screams at them to shut up and leave him alone, but they always return, sooner or later.

As the mother of a beautiful and beloved young man who has been stricken by schizophrenia, I now recognize behaviors of certain homeless people I see on the street, behaviors that I once assumed were the result of some kind of intoxication, but that I now see as the struggles of another mother's poor abandoned child, who is tormented by evil voices that won't leave them alone. We have abandoned all of them. This is not the Middle Ages, when insane people were chained to a wall and left filthy and alone in their torment. Yet today we still fail to see the humanity in our mentally afflicted children, and callously leave them chained to their illness, when medication EXISTS that could free them of their chains. AOT will help not only my son, but so many sufferers. Thousands of young people and their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers.

If any lawmaker thinks it is cruel and unfair to give antipsychotic medicine to a person who is so afflicted that they cannot give consent, please come and meet with me on a fact-finding mission. Come with me to my son's apartment when we rush over late at night, afraid he may be in thinking of committing suicide. Meet my son, a handsome young man with a sweet demeanor, except that he has large raw unexplained scars on his legs from 3-degree burns, his skin is gray with grime because he no longer bathes, and if he smiles, you will see that his teeth are all rotting out, because, in his psychosis, he thinks he doesn't need to brush his teeth or go to the dentist, because when he teeth rot out, new and better ones will grow in.

If Maryland had AOT when my son got ill, this would never have happened. If AOT finally passes, my son will need to have all his rotten teeth pulled and replaced with artificial teeth. That's the least of the harms that have been done to him and others due to lack of AOT. It's the tip of the iceberg.

We have tried to get him to move to a neighboring state, because Maryland is behind the times regarding AOT and nearby states have all passed AOT laws that would help end his suffering

and ours. However, he is already struggling against suicidal thoughts and voices that tell him to do horrible things, and does not even want to talk about moving.

He tells us that when the voices return, commanding him to do bad things, he feels immense anxiety and rage. He says he has learned that if he expresses violence on an inanimate object, such as furniture or a wall, that the voices go away for a while, and he can have some peace. As a result, he has never harmed anyone, but he has been evicted from several apartments for violently banging the walls as he attempts to calm his unending torment. After his most recent eviction, he owed \$2,000 in damages, having destroyed extensive areas of interior walls and two metal doors.

I was stunned when I saw he had stabbed a pair of scissors into a wall perhaps 20 times, leaving big gashes, like something out of a horror movie. I told him this looked pretty scary. He looked at me and said softly, "Mom, that shows how much I didn't want to hurt anybody."

Dear lawmakers, there's a better way to banish the cruel demons of psychosis. Violence against furniture and walls is not a solution. Violence against self and others is surely not a solution. Refusing to deal with the problem is not a solution – it is heartless abandonment of our most afflicted. AOT is a rational and compassionate solution. In the name of compassion and rational government, please pass the law. FAVORABLE.