

House Judiciary Committee
HB 529 – Supported Decision-Making
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Position: Support

Submitted by:
Audrey Sellers
2523 Wentworth Road
Parkville, MD 21234

Hello, I'm Audrey Sellers, an individual with disabilities and Advocate with Disability Rights Maryland. Thank you for considering my testimony in support of House Bill 529.

At this time, formal supported decision-making (SDM) agreements are used mostly by individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. But SDM can also be positively utilized by people with serious mental illness (SMI). Since symptoms typically fluctuate over time, SDM can be used by persons with SMI when planning ahead for future times of impairment.

Many individuals with SMI cherish their independence, distancing themselves from support systems as needed to defend against unwelcome interventions. This isolation worsens symptoms, raising the likelihood that serious consequences – such as substance use, incarceration, or suicide – will ensue from this period of heightened impairment. The good news is that a person with SMI can preemptively mitigate the life impacts of recurring impairment through use of SDM.

SDM could, in fact, help me as I navigate life with Bipolar 1 Disorder. Fall of 2020 presented me with the most significant manic episode of my life, and I didn't see it coming. During this period, I slept about 2 hours per night; for the rest of the night I'd walk the streets of South Baltimore, or zip around on scooters, or dance, or make friends from strangers. Suffice to say my behavior was resolutely risky. My well-meaning family pushed for hospitalization. I refused and, fearing involuntary admission, soon stopped communicating with my entire family. Despite having 17 years of experience navigating behavioral health services, I knew that, if given the power, my family wouldn't honor my own preferences for treatment. The risk of institutionalization was too high for me to stay in contact with my family support system. I would just have to get by on my own.

Having since learned about SDM, now I hope to utilize a formal, legally recognized SDM agreement to authorize a trusted friend to help me manage my SMI. This agreement would enable my friend to act on my behalf while protecting my rights, including the right to consent to medical care. I truly believe that my life can be happy, productive, and fulfilling, assuming that I effectively manage my SMI. In summary, a formal, legally recognized SDM agreement would help me make good decisions even in times of impairment, so I will reach my full potential.

By supporting HB 529, you will help individuals with varied disabilities to lead self-determined and fulfilling lives. You will help people like me. I urge you to support this bill. Thank you very much for your time and attention.