

SB480 Testimony

Eric Smith

Position: SUPPORT

Hello. My name is Eric Smith, and assisted outpatient treatment (AOT) saved my life. Before AOT, I had a terrible quality of life. Shortly before entering into AOT, I wouldn't eat anything other than butter because voices in my head told me everything else was poison. I also thought I was an asset working with the FBI...and since the reality I was living was no reality at all, I was arrested not long after that because I was trespassing, going places the voices in my head told me to go.

At that time, I did not voluntarily seek out nor remain engaged in any type of treatment for severe mental illness because of anosognosia. Anosognosia, a brain based impairment that is common for people like me, stole my ability to understand I was ill and prevented me from making rational choices. No matter what anyone told me, I believed I was a codebreaker for the US government.

I do not want to be psychotic, but when I was psychotic that isn't something I could understand due to anosognosia. When I was psychotic, I told numerous treatment providers and my family to leave me alone and that I didn't want treatment. The AOT team understood my voiced opposition to treatment was not the real me talking...it was me being held hostage by my own psychotic mind and anosognosia, not a personal choice.

My life was saved by an AOT judge and treatment team that recognized I needed rescuing from my illness...and the only way that was going to happen based on my history and presenting symptoms was by involuntarily stabilizing me as an inpatient and then immediately stepping me down into AOT as soon as I no longer met criteria to remain a psychiatric inpatient.

Without AOT, I would have continued on my path of not seeking out or trusting treatment providers...without the judge and AOT as step-down care from my psychiatric hospitalization I would have stopped taking the medication I need to no longer be a danger to myself.

After more than 10 years of counseling, psychiatry, and voluntary treatment failing me, I lost faith in treatment providers. Since the AOT program I was in relied on a judge playing an active role in communication about my treatment plan, I was able to place trust back into treatment providers because the judge's authority resonated with me in a way that no treatment provider could up to that point.

I support disability rights and civil rights groups. That said, some people from these groups oppose AOT, and they are good people operating on misconceptions or misplaced fear about AOT. The truth is simple: Anosognosia and my illness robbed me of the ability to be free and live life for many years...AOT restored my ability to be free and live life, and it can do so for others.

Despite being a high school dropout with severe mental illness, thanks to AOT I graduated *magna cum laude* with a BA in psychology, and then earned a master's degree with a 4.0 GPA.

Please support AOT as a recognition that a population of people exists (including me) who need AOT, and are failed in the absence of it...and have faith in the wonderful treatment providers and judges of Maryland to make AOT work for people like me who need it.

47 of our 50 states have created AOT laws, and it is time for Maryland to join them.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you for your time and consideration.