

SB480 Testimony

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Position: Favorable

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My name is Debra Bennett. I am a concerned family member and caregiver of a loved one with a severe mental illness (SMI), a NAMI member, and a volunteer Maryland Ambassador with Treatment Advocacy Center.

My 34-year-old son is diagnosed with a SMI, substance use disorder, and a severe hearing impairment. He has been unstable for almost two years now -- revolving through homelessness, hospitalizations, victimization, and incarceration. Since 2021, he has been hospitalized 16 times -- eight in 2021, seven in 2022, and once already this year and it is only February. The cost of his hospitalizations must now range between \$500,000 to a million dollars!

My son has tried to use literally all outpatient **voluntary** services in three Maryland counties (Anne Arundel, Frederick, Baltimore) and Baltimore City to obtain stability-- **unsuccessfully**. Maryland only offers **voluntary** outpatient services but they do not work for everyone with a SMI.

Last year, out of 12 months he was hospitalized for nine and only in the community for three in a **voluntary** residential program in Baltimore City. Because his illness affects his insight about his need for consistent treatment and housing, he left the program and became homeless in June. Later in June and July he was hospitalized. In one encounter, the crises team said, he was hearing auditory hallucinations and running nude in a public park. In another, he was harassing people and seen beating his head on the side-walk. He told the responder, "I don't have control of my life anymore, I need medicine." In addition to medication, my son needs an AOT program to ensure he takes the medicine, stays in treatment, and housing. All of these are needed for him to remain stable in the community.

Last August, after being discharged from the Baltimore City hospital to the **voluntary** crisis resident in Anne Arundel County, he left after 10 days. He was homeless and still unstable. He was assaulted and taken to the ER but he left. Only days later he was arrested for trespassing. My son did not need handcuffs, he needed an AOT program. The court committed him to a Maryland state forensic psychiatric hospital for five months.

On January 30, after five months confinement and psychiatric treatment, my son was discharged to a different **voluntary** residential program in Baltimore City. While I was very hopeful about the new program, I also asked myself what would be different this time? Absolutely **nothing** changed for him! Within less than two weeks, he was back in the hospital. On February 22, he was discharged and returned to the program. I wish I could be optimistic this time but without an AOT program, I do not see how the cycle will end.

For almost two years, my family has not seen our loved one outside of a treatment setting. My son used to say that I was his best friend, but now he says "I'm not his mother."

AOT could save my son's life. AOT could restore our family. I urge you to support SB 480. Thank you.