

**Senate Bill 255 Public Health - Home- and Community-Based
Services for Children and Youth
Senate Finance Committee
February 14, 2023
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

It is not an overstatement or an oversimplification to say that wraparound services saved our family. My name is Sarah Elwell and I live in Montgomery County, MD. I am a parent of 3 children, all of whom had profound struggles at the onset of the pandemic. My son had more severe behavioral problems and the Roscoe Nix school counselor Ms. J suggested looking into wraparound services. She saw my family's challenges, our stress and did not write us off or wait until the situation was too severe to remedy. My family is receiving wraparound from JSSA (Jewish Social Services Agency). I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 255.

Prior to wraparound services, every day was filled with trials and tribulations, at the same time that my mom continued to deteriorate with a terminal disease. Tantrums, broken furniture and devices, yelling, school refusal, anxiety, loneliness. Calls and messages via Class Dojo from the school. They even asked me for my suggestions and recommendations. As a lifelong educator, I had always found ways to get through to young people, to turn negatives into positives and yet here I was, unable to do that within my own family. I felt like a failure, like a hypocrite. I questioned everything including my ability to change the course of our family trajectory, which felt like a heavy boulder barreling down a steep slope toward a cliff. Far more often than I would want to share, I wept, I was enraged, I wanted to give up.

I was on the literal edge of sanity dealing with the numerous issues plaguing my children. When I had a hard time stepping across the stigma of seeking mental health counseling, wraparound services offered that service, and I enrolled my other children in therapy as well. At a time when all I could see were weaknesses, wraparound services focused on my family's strengths. When I felt like consistency was impossible, wraparound services offered a steady weekly check-in schedule with consistent leadership from Lynisha Williams, JSSA Care Coordinator, and Melody Smith, Certified Family Peer Specialist from the Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc. (MC Federation of Families). When I felt like anything extra would be too much, wraparound services linked me to an 11-week Strengthening Families Program class offered by MC Federation of Families, mentoring, and celebrations so the "extra" became all the things we didn't know we needed but we did. Wraparound services taught me that strengthening my family in this current pandemic era is a constantly evolving endeavor.

I cannot quit with this team in my corner.
I cannot falter with my family on the line.
I cannot keep quiet when our community is vulnerable.

These familial struggles are a connecting thread in our community. Though I could have continued to try to hide the shame I felt with these issues, JSSA gave me the courage to step

forward, ask for help and make changes to keep our family safe, secure and strong. I want this safe space, this brave space, to be accessible for all Maryland families who need it.

I have never experienced a program like this before, and the research is conclusive that this high-fidelity wraparound service is a model that works. It is individualized to the needs of each family and the dispositions and motivations of each child. A cookie cutter approach would have been helpful, but a deeply personal and tailored program like this one is transformational. COVID forced us to do so much alone. With this program I feel the power of having a community alongside me. My relationships with my children and with myself have changed for the better. I will by no means claim to have it all figured out or paint a portrait of perfection. But I will say my canvas is wider, my palette is more varied and the brushes at my disposal have increased in number. I am troubled by the thought that if we do not intervene early with programs like this now, what destructive impact that will have on children and their families, desperately looking for solutions, looking for ways to have them achieve their full potential, finding ways to share with a wider world the vibrant light that shines deep within. For JSSA, every child is unique and capable of so much more. I share this experience because I want us all to make it through these struggles intact, and possibly more fortified than ever.

Maryland's youth and families deserve a standard of care that can meet their needs. I implore you to restore and expand these services that best serve our kids. An investment in family health today is an investment in a stronger, safer and more inspiring community and citizenry in the future. I urge this committee to pass Senate Bill 255.