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Written Testimony House Bill number: HB823

Submitted by David Pickar, MD

When the psychiatric hospitals closed during the last quarter of last century there was an egregious failure of providing alternatives for these patients who needed help. When interviewing one of my patients' mothers about her son who suffers from schizophrenia, she said, "where are they now? I think you know. They are in the jails, they are on the streets, they are in the cemeteries." If the hesitancy to pass an Assisted Outpatient Therapy (AOT) bill is that of denying civil liberties, I ask you: Where are the civil liberties for someone in jail? Where are the civil liberties for paranoid people on the streets that society shuns or runs from? Where are the civil Liberties of those in the cemeteries? I respect civil liberties; it is a right that everyone deserves. But as the mother of the patient said, these folks have no civil liberties. And if you do not understand that, you are grossly uninformed about severe mental illness (which affects 1% of the population of the world, across cultures with the same symptoms) and the devastation, pain and financial costs that it presents.

During my career, both at National Institutes of Mental Health where I ran the schizophrenia Branch for many years, or in my private practice, I have treated hundreds of patients with severe mental illness that involves psychosis, or separation from reality. I have seen parents of patients beg the police to take their son or daughter from the streets to a jail so they will be safe. I myself have depended on the care of the Montgomery County Police on multiple occasions to help me with patients in distress.

And yet, once the patients are in the care of the police, or in a jail, or in a hospital, they cannot be made to take their meds in the State of Maryland and are frequently released within 48 hours. They should have an option to regain their civil liberties by taking an anti-psychotic medication, at least until they can make some decisions for themselves. Mental Health Courts have not provided the panacea that was thought that they would. The only option at this point is AOT.

Thank you for your attention to the matter.

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