

HB823 Testimony – Assisted Outpatient Treatment
Health and Government Operations Committee
March 14, 2023
Laura Pogliano, Baltimore, MD
POSITION: Favorable

My son would have qualified for Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT). Since Maryland did not have that option, when he stopped his psychiatric medication, he deteriorated. Had he been in AOT, he could have remained on medication and avoided much suffering while he stopped his medication and then tried to starve himself to death. He could also have avoided an 8 week hospital stay with initial suffering for three weeks with no treatment while waiting for three legal battles before he received lifesaving medication.

In early April of 2012, my son announced he was crippled and went to bed in the middle of the day. His ankle was pulverized. He had a brain tumor. His back was broken in three places. He promised to get up when he healed. I asked him, When will that be? He said that he wasn't sure, but probably not soon. I left his bedroom and closed his door.

In the next two weeks, he quit eating and drinking. He couldn't trust anyone to bring him food. He saw poison being pumped into the water supply. He could only use the rest room with assistance. He smelled; his clothes were turning black. His lips were chapped and cracked, his hair matted. I sat by his bed, putting ice chips in his mouth and wiping his face, begging him to make a good decision for himself and see a doctor.

Two weeks later, police crept up the stairs to his room and helped him, shaking, weak, and filthy, into a squad car to go to the hospital.

If you think that's an odd series of events, it's because I left something important out. My son is severely mentally ill. He has schizophrenia, a thought disorder that includes hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia. Before the April events, he had quit taking a medicine called Clozapine, used for hard-to-treat cases. Between February and March, he quit bathing and changing his clothes. He became disorganized and missed work, then got fired. He began sitting in the living room all day, not speaking, and staring at a television that wasn't turned on. He made no phone calls, saw no friends, made no attempts to engage in any activity. He couldn't answer questions, even when they were direct.

He was sicker than he'd ever been. He really, really needed to get to a hospital.

In early April, I phoned Crisis Intervention teams, both county and city, three times, but no one would come. Finally, I went to the local courthouse and begged a judge for an emergency petition. In Maryland, it's a legal remedy to bring a person who is a danger to himself or others in for an evaluation. The police served it the next morning. He was taken to Johns Hopkins Hospital where he refused medication.

On April 16th, he lost a hearing on his competency. He was still in a wheelchair, still in his same clothes, and unmedicated. A week later, he lost a medical panel convened to decide if medication was warranted. He was still in a wheelchair, in the same filthy clothes, but was now mute and catatonic. After a 48-hour appeal process, he finally received an injection of an antipsychotic. This was his 9th hospitalization in four years. He was unmedicated overall approximately three months and lost forty pounds. That was a result of waiting until he was a danger to himself to be able to seek care.

He was discharged from the hospital nearly two months after he was admitted. He walked his sister down the aisle at her wedding on July 28th.

I want to ask you: What should I have done as a mother, when my son went to bed and tried to starve himself to death? One of the absurdities of our situation is that if my son had any other brain dysfunction, I would be legally negligent and abusive in not seeking medical help, but with the same injured brain, in a different disability, I am "supporting a choice" he makes to starve himself while delusional. I'm sure he was not sorry that his rights were restricted, or that I fought to give him his life back. AOT is a much less restrictive alternative than hospitalization and helps prevent terrible suffering and saves lives.

Please give HB823 a favorable report and save lives.