

SB453 Testimony

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Position: FAVORABLE

My loved one has suffered more than 3 decades with serious mental illness (SMI) after an initial psychotic episode while serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. Since the bipolar disorder diagnosis in 1994, my ill family member has experienced years of relationship problems, financial losses, unemployment, periods of incarceration, numerous hospitalizations, and times of homelessness because Maryland does not offer Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT).

Because of anosognosia—the lack of understanding and insight into the illness and the need for treatment--there is a recurring struggle with adherence to medication and treatment. The gaps and delays in medication and treatment adherence results in the illness worsening and setbacks in mental health wellness and recovery. We have lived through many years of our loved one chronically struggling to succeed in the community with untreated symptoms and then end up cycling through jail and hospitals.

We filed many petitions for emergency mental evaluation through the Prince George's County Court System when circumstances and behavior were an imminent danger to others and/or to our ill-health family member. The emergency petition filing is not an easy decision for our family to undertake in part because the fear of law enforcement not having the training or understanding about erratic and bizarre behaviors that are common for persons with untreated mental illness and the possibility of negative consequences for all parties involved.

The process has been very exhausting for our family as the decision to file the petition is our final effort--last hope--for help and typically occurs after spending weeks or even months dealing with ill-behavior and trying to get medical assistance. On the other hand, it has been equally as traumatic for our loved one who lacked understanding about the circumstances during the peak of illness and was obviously very confused, highly manic, and out of control (yelling, cursing, punching holes in the walls, damaging property, aggressiveness, argumentative, threatening, etc.) These situations are very heartbreaking to witness and extremely difficult to control.

Most serious mental illnesses are treatable. Everyone, including persons with mental health conditions, wants and deserves a system of care and relevant interventions that will address their medical needs. Accessibility to timely treatment and services are critical to mental health recovery and wellness. According to SAMSHA, with early and consistent treatment, people with serious mental illnesses can manage their conditions, overcome challenges, and lead meaningful, productive lives.

The implementation of AOT in Maryland will help to foster better health outcomes for my loved one and other Marylanders with serious mental illness and improve the health, safety, and welfare of individuals under AOT and the public.