

HB576 Testimony

From: Laura Shears Coates, 114 Ferndale Road, Glen Burnie MD, 21061

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Last year I attended an AOT hearing to advocate for the needs of my beloved brother, Joshua Carey who could have very much benefited from Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) in Maryland to help stabilize his severe mental illness. Sadly, from the time of that hearing to today my brother is no longer with us. He passed away due to complications that arose from his fear of taking his prescribed medications, at the young age of thirty years old. At an age where many of our lives begin to take off, my brother's life was ended.

Joshua suffered from severe paranoia that caused him to avoid not only taking his mental health meds but also medications he needed for medical conditions and his health continued to deteriorate over time. My brother's diagnosis of Schizophrenia caused a lack of insight that prevented my brother from understanding the severity of his condition and agreeing to treatment willingly. Even with an order of guardianship saying he has no capacity to make decisions regarding his mental health, it left us at a standstill because we were told he wouldn't benefit if he couldn't comprehend. However, AOT programs in other states have demonstrated the ability to engage participants in treatment adherence, even if they lacked insight into their need for treatment.

When I first heard about the idea of an AOT program being implemented in the state of Maryland, I finally had a glimpse of hope. Prior to that I felt every turn I made to help my brother led me to a dark dead end. At the last AOT hearing, my brother was in an extended hospital stay due to providers being unsuccessful in finding appropriate placement for him and within a month of his release to the community to his family, he was dead. His discharge from that hospital stay even noted that no progress was made to alleviate his symptoms but attempts to find placement were unsuccessful.

What plays in my head over and over is how many times I have voiced that if my brother didn't get some type of help to ensure his treatment adherence and stabilize him, that he would die, and I was right. I have so many emotions that I am trying not to speak from, but the truth is I am very angry and I am very hurt that Maryland's system failed my family and failed my brother. I miss him tremendously and him and I always talked about when better days would be coming. I lied to him because those days never came. If only AOT was implemented here in Maryland prior to his death, he might still be here today and we may have had a chance to look forward to those better days.

While it is very difficult for me to engage in this advocacy process as I am still grieving the loss of my brother, I know how important HB 576 is to establish AOT for many other families that have loved ones with severe mental illness and a current system designed to fail them. I think often times when we think of mental health, we think only the person suffering from the SMI is affected but the truth is it negatively impacts the family members and caretakers as well, who fight endlessly for a prayer to be answered and their loved one to get the help that they need. My mother who stood by my brother's side throughout his entire journey with severe mental illness was subjected to finding her son face down in the bed, blue, with no pulse. Due to the trauma and now her own mental illness because she feels she failed her child, she cannot take part in this hearing this year although I have made multiple attempts to engage her.

Even though my fight for advocacy isn't for Josh anymore, I won't stop because I never want to see another family experience the heartache that ours had to. I also want to honor my brother by following this through until AOT is implemented in Maryland like it is in 47 other states. My biggest hope is that this legislation establishes a successful AOT treatment program here in Maryland that can provide another family the hope we weren't able to achieve with my beloved brother, Josh. Please consider the families who suffer with their loved ones who have SMI as well of the lives you can save and give HB576 a favorable report.

Laura Shears-Coates(info@ittakesavillageforchange.org) is a former family caregiver of a brother with SMI, a business owner for an OMHC Mental Health clinic in Maryland, Takes A Village for Change LLC, and operates a 501(c)(3) organization that provides housing support to those engaged in mental health care, It Takes A Village For Change Inc. The views are her own and do not represent any organization.