

Testimony for SB 453: Mental Health - Emergency Evaluation and Involuntary Admission Procedures and Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs

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Testimony of Steve Raabe

622 Wood Lot Trail Road, Annapolis (Anne Arundel County), MD 21401

Position: Support

I am submitting this testimony in my capacity as President of OpinionWorks LLC, a non-partisan, independent research organization based in Annapolis, to share recent polling on voter attitudes about Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT).

These findings are based on our statewide poll of 518 registered voters, commissioned by the Treatment Advocacy Center and conducted online and by telephone by my firm from December 8 to 12, 2023. The poll has a potential sampling error of $\pm 4.3\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

This poll identifies overwhelming support for AOT – with four out of five Maryland voters in favor. This support crosses party lines, and is characterized by a high level of urgency, driven by deep concerns about mental health problems and mental illness in Maryland’s communities, and in voters’ own families. Voters say AOT offers support to help address these problems in multiple ways.

The law was described to poll respondents as follows:

“State leaders in Maryland are considering a new law to improve mental health called “assisted outpatient treatment.” For people with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or severe bipolar disorder, the law would let a civil court order supervised mental health treatment and services in their community, in cases where the individual has a history of not following treatment after repeated hospitalizations for mental illness, got mental health services while in jail, or is a danger to themselves or others. No forced outpatient medication or court ordered penalties, such as jail or fines, are allowed.”

Voter support for AOT is overwhelming. More than four out of five voters across Maryland (81%) are in favor of AOT. Only about one in ten (11%) are opposed, with 8% unsure.

- Support for AOT crosses all party lines, with 85% of Democrats, 68% of Republicans, and 84% of unaffiliated voters in favor.
- It is supported by 81% of African-American, 92% of Hispanic, 83% of Asian, and 81% of White voters.
- Support is also extremely strong in all regions of Maryland, never falling below 70% in any region of the State.

Several factors help explain the extremely high level of support for AOT. First among these is how serious a problem people feel mental illness is in Maryland’s communities today. Seven out of ten voters (70%) believe mental illness is “a serious problem,” or “a crisis that needs immediate attention.”

This level of concern translates into widespread impatience for action by the State, with a resounding 86% of voters across Maryland saying, “Untreated serious mental illness is a significant problem in Maryland and should be a top priority for our state.”

This issue touches people personally. Mental health issues and mental illness have impacted an enormous number of Marylanders, with 70% saying that they, or someone in their life, has experienced mental health issues or mental illness.

Voters also strongly indicated that they have concerns that people suffering from serious mental illness could be a danger to themselves or others, leading 88% to agree with the statement, “People suffering

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from serious mental illness should be required to receive treatment if they are likely to be a danger to themselves or others.”

The poll tested a variety of reasons why people might support AOT. Three ideas emerged as the most compelling for voters. Taken together, these arguments identify three important dimensions of voters’ support for AOT:

- **Leading the list is this: Voters believe AOT would be effective**, because it “promotes continuity of care, breaking the revolving door of repeat hospitalizations, incarceration, homelessness, and even tragic interactions with law enforcement.”
- **The second most compelling reason for voters is the idea that AOT respects people’s personal rights.** The idea was expressed like this: “Assisted outpatient treatment helps people with serious mental illness get outpatient treatment in their community, while respecting their personal rights. It does not force people into hospitalization or to take medication.”
- **Also scoring very strongly is the support that AOT can provide for families**, stated like this: “Many people who suffer from serious mental illness are unable to recognize that they have a disorder and need assistance. Without assisted outpatient treatment, family members cannot intervene to get necessary mental health treatment for their loved ones.”

Voters strongly endorse Assisted Outpatient Treatment because their level of concern about mental health problems in their communities and in their own families is so high, and because they believe this law would help in multiple ways. In fact, this poll conveys a sense of urgency about this issue. Marylanders want the State to act.

A more detailed memorandum outlining the results of the poll is available from the Treatment Advocacy Center.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this overview of public attitudes about this issue.