

Written Testimony in FAVOR of HB 576

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I am both founder and director of a non-profit community outreach ministry. I serve those most forgotten in our community such as those in our local Title 1 school, the local nursing home, and women in the local detention center. I am also the parent of a son with SMI or severe mental illness. In this capacity I give my testimony. I reside in Cecil County, Maryland.

My son suffers from a severe mental illness. He is, and has always been, a well-liked and gentle soul who was never in trouble with the law in the least. He was captain of the high school soccer team, played baseball, basketball and soccer, and was chosen homecoming king in his senior year. In addition, Daniel always had a part time job, participated in youth groups, and applied, was accepted, and attended college until he was too ill to attend. He is now, at the age of 24, incarcerated in a forensic hospital because of not receiving the care he needed while at the height of a severe schizophrenic cycle. His name is Daniel.

Because of severe hallucinations and psychotic voices, Daniel, who I affectionately call Danny, tried to take his life with a gunshot wound under the chin at the age of 20. Miraculously, with the hand of God through good samaritans, city police, and the skilled care of oral maxillofacial surgeons, critical care doctors and nurses, my son survived. After more than one year and 11 surgeries later his mouth and face were restored. He could see, though not perfectly, could eat and speak close to baseline, and the wound in his face was mostly repaired without great tragic loss. Let me be clear with you that it was the psychotic thoughts and delusions that drove him to the point of suicide.

After that first year of Daniel's physical healing, the severe mental illness that drove him to the suicide attempt remained. Though he had biweekly psychological counseling using ERT (Exposure Response therapy) and CRT(Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) in addition to monthly psychiatrist visits, Daniel was constantly tormented in his mind. Daniel's condition worsened. From February to April of 2023, two years after his suicide attempt we took him to Christian Hopsital, Wilmington Hospital, Union Hospital, and Sheperd Pratt Psychiatric Urgent Care seeking help for suicidal and even homicidal thoughts. He was hospitalized twice in mental wards to make him stable, and each time was released after 7 and 10 days respectively.. At each release he was assigned to go to IOP -intensive outpatient programs. One social worker even told me, and I quote, "I wish we didn't have to allow him to leave." Daniel had petitioned to get out. Daniel had come to the point of anosognosia and was not able to realize he needed treatment.

The very evening Daniel was released from Sheppard Pratt as an inpatient, Daniel left home having delusions and would not return. We tried everything we could. Then Daniel was no longer heard from and found people who took him in but wouldn't tell us where he was.

Two weeks later, on May 7, 2024, Daniel allegedly broke into a friend's home. The friend was not present, but the police were called. Daniel allegedly picked up the friend's shotgun and began shooting it. Thankfully no one was seriously hurt. Three police officers were hit but released the same day. Thankfully Daniel did not lose his life. Daniel was arrested, and while out of his mind, allegedly attacked a prison guard. My sweet son who previously had no record, never fought, was a friend to everyone was now on arrested, bound, and on 24 hour suicide watch. Daniel stayed on suicide watch for about three weeks. Daniel was started on medication after I informed the prison nurse of his condition. Several days later, a judge ordered Daniel incompetent to stand trial. When a bed became available Daniel was transported to Clifton T Perkins Psychiatric Hospital in Jessup Maryland. My son is still there today, February 12, 2024, and will be there until his trial date. His future is uncertain, and he faces very serious charges.

If Daniel was given AOT he would not be in prison today. He would have received the diagnosis and medication that would have restored his mind to stability. Because AOT was NOT mandatory and enforced, he lost his freedom, his health, his family and his future. The schizophrenia cycle progressed because he did not have the care he would have received through AOT. He also now has increased brain damage because he did not receive necessary care. People who have SMI are often not well enough to know what they need. This bill is necessary to help those who cannot help themselves, to help them have health, their life, a community, and a future. Please, please, please vote in favor of House Bill 576.

Respectfully submitted,
Maria Donnelly