

HB576 – Assisted Outpatient Treatment
From: Mary and Carl Custer, Montgomery County
Position: SUPPORT

My husband and I live in Bethesda, MD in Montgomery County. Our 40-year-old grandson was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 18 in 2002. We want to share his story and ask for your support for Assisted Outpatient Treatment for those who refuse voluntary outpatient treatment or discontinue their treatment. This legislation would enable family members to seek help for loved ones with severe mental illness before they get caught up in the revolving door of psychosis, arrests, and hospital admissions.

Our grandson was caught up in this revolving door from 2002 to 2007. There were a total of five hospital admissions and six arrests in Montgomery County. One of the biggest impediments to stopping the revolving door was the lack of Assisted Outpatient Treatment in Maryland. Each hospital stay occurred only after a significant deterioration in his mental health and significant efforts on the part of the entire extended family. The hospital stays were brief, resulting in minimal stability, and the lack of official follow-up would result in treatment discontinuation.

This revolving door finally came to an end in 2007, when the New Jersey Highway Patrol found our grandson on the shoulder of I-95 with no money, no credit cards, and no gas. They informed us that he had not done anything illegal, but appeared to be manic and in danger. I confirmed that he had a history of mental illness and hospitalizations. They said they would keep an eye on him. Within a few hours, we received a second call. He had been arrested in Phillipsburg, NJ, and taken to the jail in Warren County. We found this level of contact unique.

The following incarceration was also unique. The judge set a high bail to deter premature release, and the facility asked us to contact his psychiatrist to provide them with prescription information. We arranged for release after 30 days when he was sufficiently stabilized to continue treatment in the community.

New Jersey has an Assisted Outpatient Treatment law that was instrumental in a positive outcome for our grandson. Even though we lived in MD, the judge treated us as if we were NJ residents and warned our grandson, from the bench, of the consequences of discontinuing treatment.

There have been no arrests and no hospitalizations since “New Jersey.” For years, our grandson has held a full-time job and has been a contributing citizen of Montgomery County. When he needed help, Assisted Outpatient Treatment came to his aid in NJ. The revolving door finally stopped. It might have stopped sooner, avoiding multiple hospitalizations and arrests, if MD had had Assisted Outpatient Treatment.

Assisted Outpatient Treatment in MD would remove barriers to sustained treatment and contribute to positive outcomes for Maryland citizens suffering from severe mental illness. This legislation would provide much-needed assistance to police, doctors, and family members who need help to ensure that a loved one with a severe mental illness continues their treatment plan after hospitalization or incarceration.