

HB576 Testimony
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Position: Support

After 32 years as a psychiatrist at the state run Spring Grove Hospital, it appears to me that the criminalization of mental illness in Maryland has grown worse. The statutory authorization of evidence based Assisted Outpatient Treatment as proposed in HB756 would go far to prevent this shameful criminalization.

Some 60,000 Maryland residents have the tragic, blameless neurobiological illness we call Schizophrenia. A similar number suffer from often psychotic episodes of mania due to Bipolar Disorder, another brain disease. The great majority of these individuals are willing to accept continued treatment in voluntary outpatient services after acute inpatient stabilization. However, a small percentage will not, specifically because they lack the capacity to perceive the presence of their illness or the need for treatment. This cognitive deficit is a symptom of their brain disorder. Especially for these individuals, their need for sustained treatment of the more severe episodes of their illnesses are ignored by Maryland's mental health system.

Generally unappreciated, episodes of severe mental illness require several weeks to months of continued treatment with medication for the patient's acute episode to gradually resolve and before patients are stable enough to reassume independent community responsibilities. There is absolutely no way to hasten response. This fact cannot be over-emphasized. Maryland's mental health system does not currently support continued outpatient treatment for patients unable or unwilling to voluntarily participate in outpatient services.

This deficiency contributes significantly to the criminalization of mental illness, as inadequately treated patients' disorganized and terrified behavior leads to arrests. Patients are literally punished for their illness-driven behavior by prolonged incarcerations in jails and state hospitals. And the legal entanglements often lengthen their inpatient treatment well beyond clinical need, further limiting the state-wide availability of this scarce resource, i.e., inpatient treatment of more than 10 days. Tragically, in Maryland today, the only way to intensify treatment of severe mental illness is for the patient to be arrested, jailed, and court-ordered for treatment at a state facility. This is just plain cruel.

Assisted Outpatient Treatment is an evidence-based means of intensifying treatment for severe mental illness, for those who are unable to recognize their critical need for treatment. It would address the need for sustained treatment so often necessary for a patient to achieve improved judgment, not merely the absence of dangerousness. It would do so without requiring the patient to reside in a locked facility. It would make families feel more secure in allowing their loved ones to reside at home. It would reassure the local police that troublesome behavior is being addressed in such a way as to ensure community safety. It would increase the likelihood of civil court-sanctioned treatment while reducing the use of the more punitive criminal court-ordered treatment.

I am respectfully asking you to support HB576 to institute this life-altering treatment.