

HB576 Testimony

February 8, 2024

From: Laura Pogliano, 4010 Linkwood Road, Baltimore, MD 21210

Position: FAVORABLE

My only son Zaccaria was stricken with schizophrenia in 2009 as a junior in high school. Unlike many who become seriously mentally ill, my son was mostly compliant with treatment but he was very affected by illness and became medication-resistant. In early 2012, he stopped taking medication because he believed I was poisoning him. There was no remedy for this. Neither his doctors nor I could convince him to continue care. As the weeks passed, he became critically ill. He stopped eating and drinking due to fears of being poisoned. His delusions told him his ankles were pulverized by a hammer-wielding alien, he developed a brain tumor and broken back. By the time I was able to use Maryland's emergency petition to get him seen in the ER, he had been in bed for ten days, with only ice chips and small sips of water. He could no longer walk without assistance. *He entered the hospital in a wheelchair.* He was 20 years old, a former athlete, pianist and drummer.

Though hospitalized, he refused "poisonous" medication and he was allowed to. On day 11 of this inpatient stay, insurance tried to dismiss him. He was mute, catatonic, and in a wheelchair. The hospital petitioned the courts. I could only hope the courts declared him incompetent and forcibly medicated him. There were no laws to protect us if insurance dismissed him, and had the courts sided with the disability rights lawyer, who insisted my son could make his own medical decisions, I would have taken home a grown child who could not speak or move, in a wheelchair, and spoon fed him and ultimately, watched him die. In total, he was hospitalized 86 days. That's how long it can take just to restore competency. As upset as I was over this incident, my son was equally baffled to discover he'd lost three months of his life due to illness and that he had never been poisoned or endured pulverized ankles and a broken back, etc. His exact words were: "What happened to me, Mom?"

When an individual is too sick to know he's sick, he absolutely needs family to be able to keep him in care. Instead of incurring *hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical bills over that three month stay*, and instead of letting his brain sustain more damage without medication, my son could have been court ordered and resumed medication fairly quickly under an AOT order. We know medication works, but this takes time.

AOT can give the family and their loved one that time.

I host a weekly family support meeting for caregivers of those with schizophrenia. Nearly every family in my group of over 100 Maryland families is facing a dismal outcome because there is no way to access medication when circumstances are dire. *There are exactly two success stories in my support group* and they are directly related to accessing AOT in NY and MI, keeping the patients on court ordered treatment long enough to regain competency and understand that they need medication to live

successfully. Both families went from trauma, chaos, incarcerations, and despair, to watching their children become healthy, employed, loving individuals again. These two families “got their children back,” but because of AOT laws that are funded and correctly implemented in their states and counties.

Our “voluntary” system of care only works if you are already healthy in some capacity. And our streets and gutters and morgues are filled with the evidence of what happens when you’re too sick to ask for help.

My son’s illness was too much for him and he died in his sleep at age 23. It is too late for my son, but you have to do the right thing for other families facing this ruin. AOT has proven successes. Please don’t let other families experience our situation.

Sincerely,
Laura Pogliano
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