

TESTIMONY FOR HB576

House Health and Government Operations Committee

2/14/24

Cherie Snyder

I am writing in support of HB576 because of my son, Bryan, who will be 40 in just one month.

Bryan has suffered horrifically from severe mental illness (SMI) complicated by Asperger's Syndrome (high functioning autism). Despite the most compassionate offerings of care from Sheppard Pratt hospital specialists as well as the local Western Maryland professionals at UPMC WMD, the ACHD, Archway Station, and DSS, my son lives alone with no friends other than imaginary ones, minimal contact with the outside world, and no meaning and purpose in a house filled with trash and filth. Only in a few emergency occasions where he became combative and the police were called were we able to hospitalize him because he is not considered to be a danger to himself or others. And then, after a few days when he is stabilized, he is discharged to his house with services in place and medication - and hope that this time he can remain stable. But there is only hope - and that is not enough because according to Maryland Law, the hands of all the compassionate and skilled healers in our community are tied. They cannot help Bryan if he does not want help - he has the "right" to live the way he wants. And within weeks of discharge, he refuses help. And all the professionals who want to help can do nothing - until the next emergency.

The problem is that the brain disease Bryan suffers from precludes the capacity to make and carry out the careful plans developed in the hospital once he is off medication and refuses support. This is not freedom; this is a jail and a hell from which Bryan has no way to escape.

Because he has a large family who loves and continues to support him and because I am a social worker whose background is mental health with many connections in the community -plus modest resources to support him and advocate for him - he has been protected. But I know without a doubt, if he did not have a family and resources, he would be dead, homeless, or in jail. He is fortunate in that sense, but that is not the case for so many seriously mentally ill.

However, just because he is alive and living in a small house I bought (due to repeated evictions from rental and residential services), it does not mean he is truly able to live as a human being should live - with dignity, meaning and purpose, and respect. He knows that his hygiene is horrible and that his rambling talk when he is in public is frightening to others, so he stays home, living like a rat day in and day out with only a TV for company and imaginary friends and with food delivered from Gianni's pizza or Amazon or if we bring him meals.

Assisted Outpatient Treatment is the only service I know that can save the lives of

people like Bryan - and give them the true freedom they deserve. Mental illness is not a right, it is a jail. And AOT offers a compassionate and collaborative key to freedom.

Please support HB576.