

SB 707  
Rania Dima  
Frederick, Maryland 21704  
Position: Favorable

Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

Make no mistake, the reality is that the civil liberties of those with severe mental illness (SMI) are already stripped away, either by the disease itself, by involuntary commitment or by the criminal justice system. Psychotic brain disease is degenerative and relentless, and shows no mercy; but we can show compassion by intervening before it reaches a point of no return. Disability justice for the severely mentally ill will only come when we start addressing chronic brain disease as the biological disability that it is. We must recognize that denying access to timely medical intervention is not only discrimination, but the systemic oppression of a vulnerable population unable to help itself.

I am deaf-blind. I cannot read a sheet of paper to save my life; my eyes are broken. My son has a psychotic brain disease. He cannot see that he has a severe mental illness to save his life; his brain is broken. Without my hearing aids, I cannot understand the voices around me. Without medication, my son cannot understand that the voices in his head are a symptom of his disease, and the longer he stays in psychosis without treatment, the more damage occurs to his brain and the less likely he is to recover. My disease is degenerative. As it progressed, I received a blind cane. My son's disease is degenerative. As it progressed, he received handcuffs. We must be able to intervene before our loved ones spiral into crisis and their civil liberties are stripped away.

When my son reached his tipping point, he was so wrapped up in his psychosis that he could not understand that we were trying to help him. Instead, he believed that the "conspiracy" had finally come to kill him. Because he refused to cooperate, a SWAT team busted down his door, pepper bombed his condo and dragged him to the hospital. Instead of keeping him, the hospital released him after the mandatory hold despite telling us that they had plenty of evidence to admit him. Because my son was still in psychosis, the Sheriff's office took him to jail where he sat for 470 days to await his trial. He had no prior criminal record. He sat there with his brain still on fire, without treatment. As a result, he refused the state's offer of Not Criminally Responsible, believing it to be a trap set by the conspiracy, accrued additional charges, and spent a month in solitary confinement. He came out of jail still very sick and blamed me for putting him there. The judge's solution was to order him to have no contact with me or my husband, the two people in the world who are supposed to be there for him the most. He can't contact his younger sisters, who are growing up without him. Now, we are stuck waiting for the next crisis to unfold with our hands tied. And all the while, my son has never received the treatment he so desperately needs. This is what happens when we do not intervene. This is the fate that our loved ones await.

My family's story is not unique. According to tac.org, 20% of those in our jails are there with a severe mental illness. As a broken-hearted mother, as a disabled person, I ask that we address severe mental illness as the biological disability it is and fix the system where we can. Every disability deserves accommodations and timely medical intervention.

SB 707 strengthens the ability of providers and families to intervene earlier and more effectively to help prevent crises and protect individuals with severe mental illness (SMI) and their communities.

This bill ensures "danger" covers situations where a person with a severe mental illness (SMI) faces a substantial risk of:

- Causing bodily harm to themselves or others.
- Being unable to provide for basic needs including food, clothing, shelter, medical care, self-protection or safety to a degree that risks serious harm, illness, or death.

SB 707 is a practical, compassionate step that will save lives, reduce suffering, incarceration and homelessness and strengthen public safety.

Please give a favorable report to SB 707 as amended in the Senate without changes.

Sincerely,

Rania Dima