

Health Committee
House Bill 1014
Favorable with Amendment

Honorable Chair Bagnall, Vice Chair Cullison and Members of the Health Committee;

Please give House Bill 1014 a favorable report.

My brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia 30 years ago. His symptoms are severe, and he still hallucinates even when he takes the medications that are the most effective for him. David has been in and out of homelessness and jail in two states due to his mental illness (he's now permanently kicked out of Utah.) In Maryland, he was found not criminally responsible for committing a felony during a psychotic break that was triggered by people assaulting him for being mentally ill. He was locked up in a secure psychiatric facility for a long time, then put in a group home. Eventually, he was released to attempt to live independently and get a job. That didn't last.

For decades, David's schizophrenia has included auditory, visual, and tactile hallucinations. He threatened to kill me because the voices in his head told him to. He repeatedly threatened to shoot up his church because of his paranoid delusions. He has said that he couldn't take his medications because angels were pushing him down into a chair. He has seen dragons and claimed that vampires attacked him. He has been evicted time and time again after doing things like yelling all night while throwing things out of the window; living in such conditions that he attracted rats; and, most recently, spreading feces through his apartment when he couldn't think clearly enough to have the toilet fixed, or to at least stop using it. David isn't just verbally abusive and intimidating, but also often physically assaults family members when we check on him in person. And he has attempted suicide numerous times.

Getting David the help that he so desperately needs is always extremely difficult. Even when he went to the hospital after slamming the sharp side of a hatchet into his head, requiring many staples, the psychiatrist refused to admit him to the psychiatric ward. Even after he nearly died due a suicide attempt, the hospital psychiatrist refused to put him on an involuntary hold. Our parents have lugged boxes of medical records with them from West Virginia each time they talk to a judge to have David committed. Most of the time, we just let it go because it's such an uphill battle.

My brother is pretty consistently a danger to himself and others. He will soon be homeless again. Our parents are too old and tired to help David anymore and need to focus on their own mental and physical health. I gave up a long time ago, and only reach

out to him to see if he's still alive. It would be great if the mental health professionals who he will inevitably interact with during his next hospitalization for self-harm would be forced to treat him as a danger to himself and others. It would be fantastic if the crisis team that accompanies the police the next time my brother threatens someone or creates a dangerous situation would be able to push for hospitalization.

As for the amendment: Involuntary commitments are extremely short-term, and generally ineffective when it comes to long-term stability. My brother is discharged within two weeks (usually one), which isn't enough time for him to become stable enough to remember to take his medications or show up for appointments. He has even been discharged when his auditory hallucinations were so loud that he couldn't have a conversation with a real person. And, like just about every other mental health professional in those hospital wings, the doctor chose to release him back into homelessness rather than try to get him into a group home type of situation, or even a shelter. (One time, a psychiatrist released him within a few days simply because she was afraid of him due to his history of assault.) This creates a revolving door situation, which ultimately costs all of us – the state, hospitals, family, and the person with severe mental illness. I request an amendment that would somehow push for longer commitments in the institutions that will work with the person to become stable and have a path to general survival, rather than to just keep them off of the street for a week. I wish there were extremely long-term psychiatric facilities for the people who won't recover from severe mental illness and have proven to be a danger to themselves and others. I'm sure my brother will commit another crime, and he might get a not criminally responsible finding again, but it shouldn't take that to get him into a hospital where he can be medicated and supervised for years. He's not going to improve any more than someone with severe dementia will improve. We need to treat him and others in his situation the same way we would a senior citizen who can't be trusted to be unsupervised.

I strongly urge a favorable report for House Bill 1014 and hope that you consider my amendment. Even without the amendment, every week that my brother won't be able to hurt himself or others is a relief. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Debi Jasen
Pasadena, MD