Testimony for HB1014
February 24, 2026; House Health Committee
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Position: Support

Our son Matthew was a high-functioning young man, with a job he loved, friends, a sweet girlfriend, an apartment, and a car. Yet, gradually, he lost each of these. Two years, ago, he needlessly died a horrible, painful death because of a suicide attempt caused by untreated schizophrenia. His parents repeatedly tried to get him the treatment he urgently needed. Unfortunately, in his delusional state, he did not realize he was ill, and so would not consent. . Maryland's Danger standard denied him that treatment because it was interpreted as requiring imminent danger for involuntary hospital treatment Our hands were tied.

As his untreated disease got worse, Matt's delusions became threatening. On one occasion, in an attempt to quiet the voices that tormented him, he smashed things in our house. He began to suspect that we, his parents, were actually extraterrestrial lizard creatures from another world. Matt told us our crimes would soon be exposed and we certainly would be executed. We petitioned the court to have him receive the treatment he obviously needed. Matt was taken to the hospital for evaluation, but refused all medication and was not considered an imminent danger so he was released. We were fortunate to find Dr. David Pickar, who had led schizophrenia research at NIMH for many years. He said that although Matt was suffering from schizophrenia, he would likely benefit greatly from treatment. On the spectrum of schizophrenia functioning, Matt was exceptional. Very articulate and able to interact pleasantly with others, able to conduct research, able to reason well and carry out plans. Much of his brain worked very well. But he needed treatment with antipsychotic medication in order to recover.

Matt moved to an apartment, but was evicted for starting a huge bonfire just outside the building. At the next apartment, Matthew was cited by a fire safety inspector for disabling the fire alarm and having an explosive substance illegally stored in his refrigerator. At the court hearing, Dr. Pickar testified that Matt needed treatment, and would get worse without it. However, Matt somehow pulled himself together and presented a calm, likeable young man to the presiding judge. Matt had researched the statutes, and he argued that the amount of explosive material in his apartment was just below the chargeable amount. The judge said he was quite impressed at Matt's argument. Then, with stupefying ignorance, and brushing aside the expert testimony of Dr. Pickar, the judge pronounced that "Matt has the right to remain psychotic if he so chooses." With those words, the door to recovery for Matt was slammed shut. The judge had decided that Matt did not pose an imminent danger to himself or others, despite clear evidence to the contrary from family and a highly qualified medical specialist. Tragically, the judge was proved wrong on both counts.

A few months later, during a visit to our home, Matt told us he was leaving for Colorado. We were surprised. He often ran out of food and we took him out to get groceries every week. "Sweetie, why are you going so far away? How will we visit you?" I asked. He turned away from my gaze and said softly, "It's for your own safety, mom." At that moment, our son, despite his psychotic state, saw and bravely acknowleged what the judge and Maryland laws had refused to see. I will always be grateful that he wanted to protect us. How I wish Maryland laws had protected him.

Within the year, I received a phone call that my son had died by suicide, having set fire to his camper van. It was the dry season in Colorado, and the extensive fire could easily have spread to neighboring homes and caused many deaths. In the explosion, Matt received severe burns over 96% of his body, but did not die immediately. When the police arrived, Matt told them, "I tried to kill myself and failed. Please shoot me." Instead, he was airlifted to the emergency burn unit in Aurora, Colorado. The doctors realized that he would not survive his horrific burns, and began to treat him for severe pain while they tried to contact next of kin. They intubated him to keep his airway open, or else the pain medication would not work. They also had to make at least a dozen long and deep incisions all over his body to prevent the massive swelling of the burned tissue from compressing his lungs and vascular system. After a few hours of fruitless efforts to find his family, they stopped trying to keep him alive, and allowed his suffering to end, at last.

Is this the "freedom" that Maryland law has in mind when deciding whether a floridly psychotic person may refuse treatment that both family and doctor are urgently requesting? It is cruel and barbaric to withhold treatment from a person who urgently needs it but cannot understand that they are ill. Schizophrenia strikes our young people in their prime of life. Have mercy on them, I beg of you.