

Testimony for the February 24, 2026 meeting of the House Health Committee

Topic: HB 1014: Mental Health Law – Danger to the Life or Safety of the Individual or of Others – Definition (Right to Treatment)

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My name is Charles Richardson. I am a psychiatrist, having worked 32 years at Spring Grove Hospital. When I started, criminally-involved patients were in the minority. Now, virtually 100% of newly admitted patients to all of the state hospitals carry criminal charges, too often for non-violent, illness-driven misbehavior. Sadly, their charges significantly lengthen hospital stay, and add a heavy emotional burden to what is already a very stressful, brain-based illness. Most importantly, with respect to this legislation, criminal charges could often be avoided if a patient whose psychotic illness was clearly out of control, had been civilly certified. In my view, Maryland's overly restrictive definition of "dangerousness," has made it easier for authorities to manage an obviously psychotic patient's disruptive behavior by jailing them for a crime rather than hospitalizing them for treatment.

Broadening the dangerousness criteria could diminish an individual's presumed right to not be hospitalized against their will. But safeguards are built into the civil commitment process, including a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge, the right to appeal, and time limits on the judgments. Once stable, civilly committed patients can be discharged without court review. Ironically, a patient who is protected from civil commitment because he is not judged to be "imminently," or "right now" dangerous," which is how the standard is currently interpreted, risks far greater loss of liberty if arrested on even minor charges. And tragically, it is often the ill patient's family members who are put at risk of violence if the danger becomes "imminent," in this restrictive sense. Furthermore, delayed treatment worsens a patient's long-term prognosis. Delaying treatment until danger is imminent is waiting too long, both for the patient, and for the community. I respectfully request that the committee approve HB 1014. By specifying that danger need not be imminent, it would reduce the number of patients who are burdened by criminal charges, and reduce the risks inherent in delayed treatment.

Thank you.