

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs.

Good Afternoon,

My name is Jennifer Johnson and I am the mother and guardian of an adult son with chronic, profound Schizophrenia and Anosognosia. He was officially diagnosed at the age of 20 although his symptoms started a year prior and caused him to leave college, unable to deal with the severe symptoms of his illness and college classes. He had received a full scholarship to SCAD, as his artistic and musical talents were incredible, but those sadly, became victims of his illness as well. Schizophrenia is a serious brain disorder (an organic, physiological illness, just as Alzheimer's, cancer, diabetes etc.) When a serious brain disorder is labeled as a "mental illness" it immediately stigmatizes, marginalizes and does grave harm and injustice to the person suffering. My husband and I have been on this horrific, painful journey with our beloved son for almost 30 years now, and I could write a book about the injustices, stigma, lack of understanding, lack of empathy that my son has suffered, as if his disorder wasn't enough to suffer from. WE HAVE TO OPEN OUR EYES AND HEARTS AND FUND PROVEN PROGRAMS AND CARE THAT WORK!!! I had to become my son's legal guardian years ago to be the voice that he doesn't have due to his lack of insight (anosognosia), and though my voice is hoarse from almost 30 years of protecting, advocating and fighting for my son to be valued as treated as any other human being, I will continue to use my voice until I can no longer. MY SON WILL NOT DIE WITH HIS RIGHTS ON! He would be dead right now if I weren't his guardian and make decisions for him that he has absolutely no insight into making on his own.

I am not able to attend this hearing as my caretaking duties prevent me from being there in person. I am begging you to please, please open your hearts and make the right decisions today for all whose very lives are at stake.

We need to file the waiver request for the Federal IMD Exclusion Law (LD 445) immediately or more lives will be lost. It should never have been separated from the request for waiver for substance abuse (we are the only state to have done so) and making a choice to delay and file next year when it is time to request re-authorization of the substance abuse waiver is costing lives. This funding is critical to opening more hospital beds, strengthening, educating and implementing our existing but underutilized PTP program, increasing ACT teams and community based supports, supported housing, etc. These community services will save lives, guaranteed.

Anyone who understands anosognosia (a physiological, neurological condition in which a person is completely unaware of their neurological deficit or psychiatric condition) should also understand that walk-in crisis centers will never be utilized by people who have no insight into their symptoms. We need to provide more ACT teams, more intensive case managers which will allow more utilization of PTP orders by judges, all of which can truly and effectively prevent the tragedies such as the Lewiston shootings from happening again. Robert Card was a victim also, a victim of our broken mental health system, and I am ashamed. Ashamed that when a person needs our help and support, with or without asking for it if they have no insight, we offer them little, look the other way, and let them die with their rights on. Please make financial choices that will offer meaningful and effective support for those who are in crisis, and prevent tragedy. TREATMENT BEFORE TRAGEDY. If we don't, we are wasting precious funds on ineffective bandages, and more human lives will be lost. Please help those who can't help themselves.

Thank you.

Jennifer Johnson

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"I long for the day when we no longer use the word "mental" to describe conditions of the brain."