DATE: March 1, 2019  
TO: Appropriations Committee, Health Subcommittee  
FROM: Fran Ludwig, Parent and Gilead Board Past-Chair  
RE: House Bill 7148: Funding for Mental Health Services

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee.

My son Ben was not able to be here tonight, but he asked me to read this statement on his behalf:

From very early in my life it was clear that something was terribly wrong. As an infant I woke up screaming for no apparent reason and nothing would calm me down. As I grew older I broke every rule, became violent, and tormented my parents and sister. I had horrific nightmares, visual and auditory hallucinations, and became demanding and violent when my needs were not met.

By the time I was 16, I had been diagnosed with 13 different psychiatric disorders. No one knew what to do with me. But I knew exactly what was wrong with me. I just couldn’t put the thoughts into words that others could understand. To put it simply, I was trapped inside my own mind. I knew that all the things I was doing were wrong, but the force of my reptilian brain utterly dominated my life. The only emotions I could feel were fear and anger. I was never able to relax, every minute of every day a literal battlefield, with the entire world as my opponent. I was unable to sleep, and when I did, I was tormented by night terrors that would make the bogeyman cry.

As I grew older and stronger, my aggressive behavior became so problematic that I could no longer live safely at home, so I was sent away for two years. I went to a place where the people who were supposed to care for me beat me, starved me, berated me, and used the things that were wrong with me to punish me. No, this place wasn’t prison. It was a treatment facility for young adults with mental illness.

By some force of grace, my next move was to Gilead. I was able to live in an apartment close to my family and see them regularly. Although my ups and downs continued at first, now, ten years later, with the compassionate support of Gilead staff and my family, I have a proper diagnosis, a medication that has addressed my underlying disorder, and a mind that has been freed from its shackles. I’m beginning to build a new life for myself.

For the first time in my life, I am experiencing the emotions of happiness, love, compassion, sorrow, and sympathy. I feel like long dormant parts of myself are awakening from slumber, like Lazarus rising from the grave. I’ve been slowly putting together a billion-piece puzzle, and am beginning to discover what it feels like to be a complete human being.

I’ve begun writing with urgency, having finally found a voice that lay silenced for far too long. Despite all the insight and understanding that I’ve discovered, I instinctively know that I’ve not finished evolving yet. I was in the larval stage of my life for 25 years. Now I’m at the metamorphosis stage. I don’t know what will happen when I finally emerge as a butterfly, but I
know that whatever I become it will end up leaving a lasting mark upon our world. Of that I’m sure. I won’t be forgotten. I’ll make this world spectacular.

The streets of Middletown, our homeless shelters, our prisons and emergency rooms, and even our state mental hospital are full of Bens desperately looking for a Gilead. Not one of these individuals is any less deserving of a chance at a meaningful life than my son. Mental illness is no one’s choice. There, but for the grace of God, go you and I.

I’m well aware that our state is dealing with a fiscal crisis. That does not mean that we have an excuse to write off these lives that too often exist in the shadows and can therefore be easily ignored. It means that we have a moral imperative to use the funds that we do have in the most judicious way possible, so that they will do the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

As others will testify tonight, nonprofits can provide mental health services for less than half the cost of the same services provided by the state. If we have only so many loaves and fishes, we need to distribute them to the agencies that can feed the most people. This isn’t about power or politics, this is about our human brothers and sisters languishing on waiting lists, inadequately served by overextended staff, or simply completely off the radar.

In one of my favorite children’s books called The Little Prince, a wise fox tells a young child, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.” Tonight, I’m asking you to do three things:

- Find your heart
- Find your courage, and
- Find a way.

Thank you.