

I am interested in participating in the Mental Health Working Group Public Hearing, but can not attend in person.

My specific concern is the availability of treatment for individual's suffering from various forms or chronic mental illness. I have a personal connection to this issue because I have two individuals in my immediate family that have been diagnosed as schizophrenic, my son, and older brother.

The need for available, and if necessary mandated treatment for mental health issues is critical, and can be life saving. The availability is restricted in the state of Connecticut because Connecticut does not have an Assisted Outpatient Treatment law in place. Individuals, families, and concerned friends should not have to jump through hoops to get those needing treatment the care that they need, and deserve. The current Probate system is ineffective, and too restrictive. Those suffering, and those affected, should not have to hit rock-bottom, and be in mortal danger before treatment is ordered. Our family has experienced these challenges for the past 11 years, trying to get my son the treatment he needs, that he doesn't recognize the need for.

Below is the best summary I can provide of this issue:

An Unread Letter – To My Schizophrenic Son

By James E. Stone, Sr.

I could never tell you what was wrong, like a father would tell a son, because you would never believe me. I could never convince you that your disease could be treated, because it wouldn't let me. I could never explain that it was your disease which made it impossible for you to ever know there was anything wrong. I could never explain that every time you had to recover again, it would become harder and harder. I couldn't stop us from becoming distant. I could only watch your suspicion take all reason away, as we struggled to explain we were not your enemy. I could only watch you fade away, like one season fades into another - your personality disappearing, as it loses itself into another.

I can't explain why it happened to you, why you went away to college, and by the end of your sophomore year I started noticing there was something wrong. Those slight changes in personality, the way you became more distant, missed a family gathering here and there, started showing up late to important things. How your appearance became a little bit more unorganized. How it became too difficult for you to concentrate during class, and to go to work at your part-time job. It was a good job, and sometimes, when we do talk, you still say that you wish you were still working there, at the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Burlington, Vermont.

I know you were having problems with the girl you always hung around with. You never really called her your girlfriend, but she seemed to be. You used to go skiing a lot together, and you went on that cruise with her and her Mom. That's when you came home with your hair in all those little braids. Then I think you started growing dreadlocks. That's when I noticed more things. Not just because your hair was the way it was, but your personality seemed to change a little. It's easier to notice looking back. I know it ended up that she got a restraining order because you were trying to talk to her, and it just wasn't working. I could never talk to you about it, because by then it was too late. Not long after that you ended up in Vermont State Hospital.

It was during the trip that you, your sister, and I took out to San Diego in 2001 that I could really see, without a doubt, that something was wrong. The worst time was when we were at dinner in the Mexican restaurant, and you wouldn't talk. I can't remember exactly what happened, but you just sat there and stared. You wouldn't respond to your sister or I. I didn't understand what was wrong, and I remember that your sister started crying. I called Mom, because I wanted to bring you to the doctors as soon as we got back home. It happened again in the hotel room too – you just sat there, catatonic, is how they explained it later, when you were the same way in the state hospital.

I can't explain how it felt on my first visit, as I drove up to the hospital on that cold November day, knowing you were there, behind the cold brick, and steel barred windows. It looked more like a prison. I can't explain what went through my mind, as I walked up to the security desk in the lobby to sign-in. How my heart raced, how the lump in my throat wouldn't go away. How it felt walking up the stairs, down the long gray cinder-block hallway, and through the thick steel doors that sealed the psychiatric ward off from the world outside. How my heart broke when I first saw you in the hospital, walking down the hall into the visitors room, with your white socks on, wearing one sandal, with a washcloth draped over the top of your head. How it felt when you wouldn't talk to me, when you just sat there and wouldn't respond. How I could see the light in your eyes was gone – that the lights were out, and you were gone.

If there were ever a way that I could reason with you, to explain that what you have is a disease that can be treated, and that if you were to keep taking your medicine it would help. That every time you go off of it and end up in the hospital, it gets a little harder to recover again. And, even though your life will always be harder than everyone else's, you could still live a decent life - you could have the job you want, and your own apartment, and drive your own car. I could never tell you how proud I am of your accomplishments – how hard I know it was to finish your Associates Degree – but you did it, like everything else you can do when you try. I can't just sit and watch you fade away. I could never tell you how many times we have struggled to get you the help you need, and how hard it is to get things done – how you have to hit the absolute bottom, at risk of losing your life, before anyone will help.

Connecticut has no mandatory outpatient treatment laws in place to assist families, loved ones, and other concerned individuals who live with those experiencing various forms of debilitating psychiatric disease, and for one reason or another go without much needed and beneficial treatments. Of the New England states, only New Hampshire, and Vermont have laws in place for Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT laws). Of our other neighboring states, New York, and Rhode Island have AOT laws in place. New York's Kendra's Law (<http://mentalillnesspolicy.org/kendras-law/kendras-law-overview.html>) is a model for AOT laws around the country.

Assisted Outpatient Treatment is a form of involuntary outpatient treatment, which can be ordered under certain circumstances to ensure that an individual complies with a course of prescribed treatment – medication, counseling, or in-patient treatment when necessary. Connecticut's State and Local government representatives need to bring this legislation forward, and enact AOT laws to help prevent unnecessary tragedies from occurring in Connecticut.

Sincerely,

James E. Stone, Sr.

140-A Washington St.
Vernon, CT 06066
860-870-3408