

HB20-1284 Secure Transportation For Individuals in a Behavioral Health Crisis

Good Afternoon Committee. My name is Sandra Sharp and I am here to testify on behalf of myself and my son, Drew.

My son's first inpatient stay was after his freshman year of college, 2012. He had been very anxious since returning home for the summer, and that night was having delusions of grandeur and suicidal thoughts. He said that for me, he would let me take him to the hospital so that I could know that I did everything that I could to prevent him from committing suicide. Yet, what occurred after being admitted to the ER increased the possibility of completing future attempts. I had let my son down by taking him to the hospital for treatment, and there was nothing I could do to reverse the damage that occurred that evening. Drew, my son, after being admitted to the ER that evening spent the night in a hospital room guarded by a police officer. In Steamboat, or any small town, one knows almost everyone. Thus, the stories began of Drew being arrested and held by the police and a lifetime of self-consciousness and embarrassment began for Drew. Drew has never returned to Steamboat Springs. His younger brother who still resides in Steamboat Springs lives with the stigma of that evening. In spite of being very calm, and medicated by the ER, the next morning Drew was cuffed and shackled to be transported from Steamboat Springs to Mind Spring's in Grand Junction. I was on the floor at the hospital begging them not to treat my son in this manner, not to cuff and shackle him and put him in the back of a police car. They said I no longer had any say in my son's treatment, now that he was on a hold, he was property of the state. When Drew arrived in Grand Junction, he was comatose from the experience and has never regained his trust in treatment providers nor with police officers. Drew, and I, were deeply and forever affected by this event. I had taken what I thought was the right course of action to care for son, yet had done unmeasurable psychological damage to my son.

Since this first inpatient stay Drew has had multiple stays in inpatient facilities. His last inpatient stay was over a year ago. I found him in the bathtub unconscious. He was transported by ambulance to the hospital before transport to Johnstown. He was charged for the cost of the ambulance transport. This incident was less than two months after another suicide attempt, in which he was charged for ambulance transport. Drew's mental health has greatly declined since these two incidents. Drew refuses to call for help when he needs medical assistance. He states that he can't afford the ambulance and that an inpatient stay is no different than being in jail. The trauma due to the inappropriate and cruel transport will never be healed, for Drew or myself.

Drew has had nearly a dozen inpatient stays. Drew is now in the criminal justice system. We will never know how different the outcome would have been had there been parity of treatment in our ER's and hospitals, eliminating the need for transport and providing respectful and caring treatment. There are too many Drew's in Colorado, and too many Drew's moms.

When I read HB20-1284, the Secure Transport Bill, I felt such a sense of validation. Others had recognized that the way transport for mental health care is taking place is unnecessarily traumatizing and harmful, in addition to being too expensive. HB20-1284 will help reduce stigma and trauma to the individual and the individual's family. It is not illegal to have a mental illness, it is not illegal to search out health care for a mental illness. One should not be treated as if it is illegal.

While HB20-1284 is not the answer to all of our mental health care needs, it is the much needed first step to gain a parity of treatment for mental illnesses and to begin the process of de-criminalizing mental illness. While Drew may not survive long enough to see the passage of this bill, we talked on several occasions of the harm done by that very first experience, his memory will live on knowing that others will not suffer as he did. Sincerely, Sandra Sharp