



PETER COURTNEY
President of the Senate

Senate Health Care and Human Services Committee

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Senator Chip Shields

Senator Tim Knopp

TESTIMONY BY SENATOR PETER COURTNEY

SUPPORTING SB 823

APRIL 9, 2013

Chair Monnes Anderson, Vice Chair Kruse, members of the committee: thank you for hearing my testimony today in support of SB 823.

My name is Peter Courtney. I live in NE Salem. I am the state Senator for District 11 which includes Woodburn, Gervais, and east Salem.

I am an accidental advocate for mental health issues. I fell into the role when I was taking a tour of the State Hospital and discovered the cremains – the room of lost souls. I partnered with Karen Minnis, a Republican, and together, we went up the hill and built a new State Hospital. It was a tough lift, but together, we got it done.

During the aftermath of Sandy Hook and Clackamas, I was watching a lot of different news channels with my wife, Margie. Margie said, “You know, you’d think that such a tragedy would bring us together as a nation. Instead, we’re more divided than ever.”

As the nation argued over gun control measures, every talking head said, “We should do something about mental health.” I grew very angry, but decided to see if they were bluffing. You want to do something about mental health? Then by God, we’re going to do something about mental health. *We should* do something about mental health. *We should’ve* done something about mental health twenty years ago. But this issue always gets pushed aside, locked in a room, forgotten like the lost souls of the cremains. Not if I can help it. It’s time. It’s time to make a commitment.

According to Oregon Health Authority estimates, our current system is only reaching 35% of young people who need help and 45% of adults. This is unacceptable. SB 823 seeks to dramatically expand our state's mental health services. I'm not going to go through the list of programs – Linda Hammond will do that -- but I will highlight one of my favorites: EASA -- Early Assessment and Support Alliance. This program provides a team of on-call professionals to assist young people during a crisis. For example, Josh, a 14 year old boy sees his primary care doctor and confides that he's hearing voices and is scared. The doctor can make one phone call and within 24 hours, each team member will connect with the patient and his family to get Josh counseling, medication, and peer support. The family will also be assisted with how to best interact with Josh to help him cope and get back to health.

EASA is not currently available in Josephine County, Baker, Wheeler, Crook, or Harney counties, among many others. To get services of this kind, parents have to drive their kid for hours to a metropolitan area. What about eastern Oregon? The kids in eastern Oregon are just as important as the kids in Multnomah County. That's why it's so important we finally make this a priority. If we could fully fund our mental health system – expand programs statewide – we could not only prevent tragedies like Sandy Hook and Clackamas, we could improve lives, have a higher functioning workforce and better communities, reduce emergency room visits, and keep people out of the criminal justice system (20-50% of our inmates have mental illness).

All this translates to a healthier society and cost savings down the road. The costs of mental illness and addictions to society can't really be quantified. We're talking about real people who need help so they can be a good mother, finish college, maintain a job, quit self-medicating with alcohol and illegal drugs, volunteer to help others, and thrive.

I know that every single one of you, whether you know it or not, have someone in your life that is mentally ill or suffers from addiction. I know this because 1 in 5 Americans have a mental illness: the neighbor kid, the veteran down the street, perhaps your brother or elderly mother, Uncle Bob, the reporter who will interview you later, or your favorite waitress. Mental illness is everywhere – but it is kept behind closed doors – stigmatized. It's time to educate and eradicate the stigma and the barriers to help. This initiative, if implemented, will be a game-changer for our society. I hope you agree that it's time. It's time. Thank you.