

My name is Julianne Schaffner and I'm a resident of Eugene, Oregon. I'm submitting this testimony in hopes that you will support SB 763.

My adult son's primary diagnosis is paranoid schizophrenia. The civil commitment process failed him many times and needlessly prolonged his (and my) suffering. Through it all, I feared that he would die or be killed, or that he would hurt or kill somebody else. Here is a synopsis of our experiences:

(1) He was asked to move out of his apartment after screaming threats at a neighbor. With much difficulty I found him another apartment. Less than 48 hours after moving in, he went to a neighbor's apartment in the middle of the night with a baseball bat. He banged on the door and screamed threats because he believed the man was "talking trash" about him and our family. When the civil commitment officer interviewed the man, a former Marine, the man shrugged the incident off. He said the encounter had not frightened him, and he declined to testify at a commitment hearing. My son ended up homeless.

(2) My son verbally threatened the severely disabled, wheelchair-bound man who lived across the hall. Once the man retreated inside his apartment, my son fiddled with the locking key pad, causing the man to be locked in his apartment for the entire weekend. He was not willing to testify at a hearing, so the commitment officer dropped the case. Again, my son ended up homeless.

(3) The woman whose apartment shared a second floor landing with my son's apartment called the police, resulting in his arrest. She told police he had yelled at her, grabbed her, and threatened to push her down the concrete steps. When the commitment officer went to my son's apartment, my son threatened him, so the police transported him to the hospital. He was placed on a hold and a hearing was scheduled. The woman had agreed to testify, but in the middle of the night she called the commitment officer to say she didn't want to testify. I was allowed to speak at the hearing, but the judge condescendingly dismissed what I had to say as "hearsay." My son was released. A few minutes later he was out on the sidewalk shouting at passersby. Shortly after he lost his apartment for screaming he was going to shoot somebody.

(4) My son agreed to let me bring him to an appointment with the only psychiatrist in town who would see him, given his history of aggression. As we drove into the parking lot, he complained that the driver of "that dump truck" (which only he could see) was making threats to kill him. He went into the psychiatrist's waiting room, shouted, and broke things. I guided him to the car and told him we needed to go to the hospital. He got aggressive with me. He prevented me from getting out of the car. I finally was able to escape and call the 9-1-1. He was transported to the ER. Once in the evaluation area, he became aggressive with the crisis staff. They sedated him, then the crisis worker declared him "not a danger to self or others" and released him to Royal Avenue Shelter. A few days later he was kicked out of the shelter for punching a hole in the wall.

(5) He was homeless and it was very cold and rainy. Because of his aggressive and menacing behavior, he had been banned from the Eugene Mission, Royal Avenue Shelter, Egan Warming Center, Lane County Behavioral Health, White Bird Crisis Center, the library, the bus system, and the U of O campus. I agreed to bring him to REI to buy him a more adequate sleeping bag.

Shortly after we arrived, he assaulted me. When another customer intervened, my son punched him and knocked him to the ground. The police arrived and he was transported to the ER. The crisis worker decided that, based on his behavior in the ER, he was “not a danger to self or others.” He was released back to the streets.

(6) I filed a commitment petition, but I didn't know my son's whereabouts. The commitment officer said that if I could manage to get him to go to the ER, I was to instruct the ER staff to call him, at home if necessary. One night I was able to bring my son to the ER, and I passed on the instructions. The crisis worker came out to the waiting room. She refused to call the commitment officer. She angrily told me my son was not a danger, and she scolded me for trying to deprive my son of his civil rights. Instead of being placed on hold, he was again released. Eventually he again assaulted me, and he was placed on hold. I testified at his hearing and he was committed for the first time.

After my son's last civil commitment he entered residential treatment, first in a locked facility, then in a group home. Unfortunately, I had to fight tooth and nail to get him into this program; however, the residential treatment made a complete difference for him.

I am happy to say that my son is finally doing relatively well. He has accepted the need for meds and takes them faithfully, although he still denies that he has a mental illness. He has lived independently, with a bit of help from me, for the past three years and just moved into a wonderful apartment in a HUD subsidized building for persons living with severe persistent mental illness.

No family should have to experience this kind of barrier to accessing care.