

To the Honorable Floyd Prozanski
Senate Committee on Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation:

Dear Chairman and Committee Members,

As you know, SB187 would change the language of Oregon Statute to permit persons with chronic major mental illness to be more readily civilly committed for treatment.

I urge all of you to consider the fact that Oregon ranks dead last among the states in getting mental health treatment to those who need it most. Nearly half of our homeless people are suffering from major mental illness. We see them out there on the streets, talking to themselves, shouting, performing bizarre gestures or just sitting with a blank stare. They live exposed to the elements, in squalor and filth, and vulnerable to the violence, drugs and alcohol that characterize life on the street.

Many of these people have a very limited ability to get their basic needs met or to obtain mental health care. In many cases they are not even aware of their own mental illness. They can't do it on their own! They need help! Yet current statute, as interpreted by the courts, makes it extremely difficult for authorities to get them into treatment. The result? Many travel in a continuous circuit from street to emergency rooms to courts and back to the streets. Others end up in prison where they often languish without effective treatment until their release back to the streets.

My nephew Evan's story (not his real name) he is a case in point. Diagnosed as schizophrenic in his teens, Evan's mental illness made him paranoid to the point that he sometimes lashed out at others. His single mother could not control him but neither could she get him into a facility where he could receive treatment. In order to be committed, he had to be an immediate threat to himself or others, meaning that as soon as his episode of paranoia passed, he would be released back into the community. Now in his forties, Evan has spent a lifetime bouncing from streets to jail to home and back to the streets. His condition has deteriorated as he has learned to self medicate with dangerous street drugs and alcohol.

The saddest part of this story is that all this didn't have to happen. With early, long term inpatient treatment Evan might well have recovered from his illness and become a productive member of society. Instead he is one more member of the burgeoning homeless population that crowd our streets.

Tragedies like these can and must end. We can do better! The passage of SB187 is a small but vital step toward that goal. It would change the language of statute regarding the definition of "dangerous to self or others" to allow for the civil commitment of persons suffering from chronic major mental illness when they are manifestly incapable of obtaining consistent treatment for themselves.

I know many of you have first hand experience of the devastating consequences of

Let's use our voices to make tomorrow a brighter day for the thousands of our fellow citizens struck down with an illness of the mind. These are our brothers and sisters. Let us not forget them one day longer!