

February 24, 2021  
House Behavioral Health Committee  
900 Court St. NE, Rm. 453 State Capitol  
Salem, OR, 97301

Chair Sanchez, Vice Chair Nosse and Vice Chair Moore-Green, and members of the House Behavioral Health Committee,

When I was 14 years old I moved to Eugene, Oregon in hopes of a fresh start and new beginning with my mother and younger brother. My mother struggled with symptoms of mental illness and Alcoholism which were just becoming apparent to me at this age. Later in my life I found out that she had been diagnosed with Borderline Personality disorder and had severe trauma in her childhood which eventually gave me a better understanding and led me to my own work in the field.

We moved into a home with my mother, close to down town Eugene on East 11th street. Unfortunately, despite having gone through treatment at Serenity Lane my mother relapsed on alcohol and my brother left to reside with my aunt. I however, refused to leave. It was during this time, a mere 2-3 months, that I utilized and became aware of the Cahoots White bird clinic and will always be grateful for their help. While I know I called them more than once in this time period there is one particular incident that stands out for me the most.

I often skipped school to stay home to be with mother, sometimes to care for her and sometimes taking advantage and just avoiding my responsibilities as I tried to figure out my life in the chaos that surrounded me. My mother was always open to friends over and we often had a house full of people which at times was fun but usually ended in yelling, fighting and eventually my friends and myself getting kicked out of the house. One day I remember leaving for school and already worrying about my mother. I got to school skipped my first period and used a pay phone to call home repeatedly but there was no answer. I left to go back home to make sure she was okay. Of course when I got home she was very drunk and very upset. I remember my friends, who had come with me and I left after a huge argument and her kicking me out yet again. I can't remember where we walked but we stopped in a neighborhood when I proceeded to try to call her again from a friends home and she still wasn't okay. In the midst of sobbing and tears a friend of mine reminded me of CAHOOTS clinic and I called them. I remember my sobs and frustration in my voice as I didn't know what to do or who they were. I told them as much as I could about my mom where she was and what was going on. I told them that just days prior she had been unresponsive on the stairs and EMT responders had to resuscitate her but she refused to go to the hospital so they left.

I don't remember how long the call was or who I spoke to. What I do remember is the voice on the other end. The man I spoke to was patient and calm and understanding. He listened and spoke slowly and softly. He explained to me what they do and said that they could go out and check on her. He made sure I was okay and that I was in a safe spot. I will never forget how I felt talking with him because it was the first time in weeks that I felt like someone was really listening to me. I trusted him and truly believed that he would make sure someone checked on my mother. They were able to check on her that day and were later needed several times. My life continued to be confusing and foggy but I realized that CAHOOTS and the White Bird clinic were a resource for me that I could trust. I will forever be grateful to the individuals that helped us that day.

Mobile crisis units and teams of providers that can help in periods of crisis in a trauma informed manner are essential to the wellbeing of those who struggle with mental illness and addiction and their families. At this age, I was terrified of calling the police, as they had already been out to the home so many times and during these times they were not calm and understanding but impatient, irritated and demanding. That is not to say they didn't want to help but they were not trained in the manner to help in our situation.

As a LCSW and Clinical Manager now I not only see the view from a person who was in need of these services but also someone who works hand in hand with providers in the field. On a daily basis I see the importance of these types of services for our communities, both for individuals and their families. We need to ensure that we are pushing forward and creating more clinics like CAHOOTS to help stabilize our communities and get individuals the help they need in a trauma informed way. I know that without that intervention that day and on many others my mother may not have been around as long as she was and while that wasn't as long as I hoped, I am grateful for every moment that I had and those who helped her survive the pain and suffering she struggled with. I only hope that we can continue to do that for so many others in our community who need this help. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2417. I truly hope you will take my testimony and experiences into consideration in this important step in our field.

Sincerely,

Samantha Cunningham, LCSW  
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