

Submitter: Ian Macrae

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Behavioral Health and Health Care

Measure: HB2757

We who are relatives and friends of those suffering from severe chronic major mental illness know the heartbreak and soul-crushing frustration of seeing our loved ones decline ever further into agony and squalor because of the way Oregon's mental health system operates. It pretends to see psychotics as free agents with the power to make rational choices for themselves; it abandons them to atrocious suffering and ultimate death in the name of protecting their civil liberties, letting them die "with their rights on."

The 988 crisis number isn't going to solve this crisis. It is a step in the right direction but I want to suggest that we need to keep our eyes on the real prize. The goal should be to get all those who are suffering from psychosis into effective treatment immediately.

The current systems of mental health in our state assume that most people who suffer from serious neurological diseases will voluntarily seek treatment if they need it. Now I probably don't have to tell you that many persons affected by illnesses of the brain are distrustful, paranoid and uncooperative. Many are so delusional they have little idea that they are in fact sick. Such people do not seek treatment and will not accept treatment even when it is offered to them. There is a medical term for this condition, anosognosia, which means lacking in insight.

Now prior to the nationwide trend toward deinstitutionalization that started in the seventies and eighties, it was widely recognized that many of the severely mentally ill require court ordered hospitalization. Society took on the burden of providing care for such people. True, there were abuses and horrible crimes in some institutions, as dramatized in such films as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. But in the better mental hospitals many of those who received prompt treatment immediately after exhibiting symptoms of mental breakdown did recover and go on to live productive lives. And those who did not recover were at least able to live in safe, warm, clean and supportive environments rather than on the mean streets of our cities.

How shameful that people in psychosis here are still dying with their rights on. I know this because I tried to get several severely disturbed people help and shelter last winter only to run into the same old obstacles. Whenever I took a homeless severely mentally ill person to the Marion County Psychiatric Crisis Center the answer was the same. They would not admit them without their consent, unless they posed an immediate threat to themselves or others, and unless a relative or longtime associate signed various documents on their behalf. The Salem Hospital emergency room has

similar policies. Regardless of what the state statute actually says, that is how it is being interpreted.

I am not a lawyer or judge but I do have a moral compass and that compass tells me that when those with the very worst psychiatric conditions cannot be given treatment then something has gone very wrong. So by all means support the 988 system — but don't stop there. For the real problem is far deeper. It lies in our unwillingness as a people to come to terms with the realities of major mental illness, and our consequent failure to fulfill our moral obligation to provide shelter, and treatment to those in the most dire need.

Thank you for giving your attention to this most urgent matter.