

**Testimony in Support of H.B. 439**

**By Jamie Messenger**

**National Alliance on Mental Illness of Summit County**

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Thank you Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and Members of the House Civil Justice Committee. My name is Jamie Messenger. I am the Program Director for NAMI Summit County. We are the Summit County affiliate of NAMI, The National Alliance on Mental Illness. We are comprised of families and friends, and those suffering from severe mental illness. Our mission is to improve the quality of life for families and individuals who are impacted by mental illness through support, education, and advocacy.

I am here with important stakeholders in our community. In Summit County, we understand the importance of working collaboratively in partnership with our mental health agencies, hospitals, court and criminal justice system so that we can best serve those living with a mental health condition and their families.

Too many times NAMI has had to counsel families that because their loved one is an adult, and the current standard is not to evaluate that individual unless they are a danger to themselves or others, no medical intervention is available until their loved one has become suicidal, physically violent, or grossly unable to perform activities of daily living. This criteria forces families to watch their loved one go through progressive stages of psychiatric decompensation before they can get them any help at all. Families and friends are in the best position to recognize these early stages of mental health distress. From prior situations, they know the signs that their loved one is declining. Some of these signs are subtle, and many are not.

What are some of those behavioral signs?

- They become paranoid sometimes experiencing delusions and hallucinations- someone is following them, listening to them, speaking to them through television, or car radio
- They stop communicating
- They stop bathing

- Their sleeping pattern becomes erratic
- They stop eating
- They stop attending doctor's appointments and therapy sessions
- They harass the neighbors
- They abuse unprescribed or illegal substances.

These are just a few examples of the many behaviors that have been described to us.

Families are frustrated by their inability to help their loved one, because the law says that a person needs to decompensate to a state of being a danger to themselves or a danger to others. Unless they can be persuaded to seek voluntary medical assistance, the spiral continues downward until they are in a state of mental distress where hospitalization is necessitated.

This is akin to telling a person with chest pains and shortness of breath to ignore their symptoms, until they are in acute cardiac arrest. Research has shown with each episode of psychosis, that there is an increased risk of the individual not returning to baseline function.

Basically, H.B. 439 would enable law enforcement and other designated professionals to intervene in instances in which a person (1) has a history of untreated mental illness, (2) is too ill to appreciate their need for treatment, and (3) without treatment is likely to suffer mental deterioration and become a danger to self or others.

These situations are not plentiful. This past year at NAMI Summit County we handled over 600 calls and many more email communications. Of those, we estimate maybe 10 families would satisfy the new criteria. That may not sound like many, but if those families were able to have intervention earlier, it would have saved endless days of torment watching their loved one deteriorate to the point of involuntary hospitalization, and in some cases, jail.

H.B. 439 recognizes the fact that allowing a person to slip further and further into psychosis without intervening is, in fact, dangerous to that individual. Stabilizing the person quicker means less disruption to their lives, less likelihood of them losing their job or housing, and a better chance that they will make a full recovery. We need this standard to help our families help their loved ones.