

Testimony of
Ms Rhonda Atkins

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THE MENTALLY ILL OFFENDER TREATMENT AND CRIME REDUCTION ACT OF 2003
S. 1194

Senate Judiciary Committee
July 30, 2003

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I am grateful for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1194, The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2003. My name is Rhonda Atkins and I am a mother from Sarasota Florida whose daughter might have been spared years of torment if S. 1194 were already enacted. Instead, she saw the inside of a jail cell several times before she even turned 22 years old.

My 25-year-old daughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a severe mental illness, ten years ago. For much of those ten years, she was not being treated and her condition steadily deteriorated. She is finally in treatment now, but I can never forget what it is like when she is not. When she is symptomatic she experiences severe mania, which at its worst, means that she can go days without sleeping. Her speech gets so rapid and pressured that I can't understand her. She becomes extremely irrational - she doesn't see the world the way we do. She can be very paranoid, thinking that those of us who love her are trying to make her think she's crazy. Her paranoia caused her to run away many times and there have been too many nights when I did not know where my beautiful and vulnerable daughter was. Like so many other people with mental illnesses, my daughter tried to calm the storm in her head and began abusing substances. That only made her symptoms and her situation worse.

She was often uncontrollable and I was afraid of what she might do to herself. When things get that bad, the mental health system doesn't respond. When things get that bad, the only recourse is to call the police. I can't even count how many times they had to come. While many of the law enforcement officers were compassionate and appreciated my daughter's illness, engrained in my memory are the law enforcement officers who were rough and could have escalated her symptoms to the point where she or they might have been hurt. One officer told her "if you were my daughter, I would knock you across the room."

The first time my daughter was arrested, it was for a trespassing charge. It was an opportunity to get her into treatment, but there were no services to divert her to. There were only waiting lists for services. Later, she was arrested on a drug charge, not surprising since she was self-medicating at that point. Unlike her earlier arrest, this time we had hope. She was diverted to a drug court, but our hopes were dashed because even in the drug court, they had no understanding of mental illness. Not only did the court fail to integrate treatment of substance abuse and mental illness, a social worker in the court actually discouraged it. The result was predictable - when my daughter stopped taking her medication, she spiraled into a mania that resulted in her repeated hospitalization. One time she went directly from the state hospital to a jail cell - from treatment to no treatment because they didn't give her medication in jail.

While her friends were in college, getting married, and having babies, my sweet daughter spent years bounding through the streets, jails, emergency rooms and living with drug dealers. Three years ago, she was sleeping in urine, weighed 81 pounds, had sores all over her body.

This bill could have saved my daughter years of her life and made all of us safer. The reality is that law enforcement officers provide the crisis response for people with mental illness. Without training, their ignorance of mental illness can too easily exacerbate an already tenuous situation. But, an awareness of mental illness allows an officer to facilitate an outcome that can save everyone time, expense and suffering.

Proper training will allow law enforcement officers to recognize opportunities to divert people to treatment rather than incarceration. But, there must be a coordinated system of treatment and services to divert people to. Nothing can be gained by diverting a person to a waiting list. This bill will provide the resources necessary to accomplish that goal.

And nothing can be gained by diverting people to services they do not understand they need. My daughter suffers from a brain disease, one that makes her unable to recognize that she needs treatment. She would have benefited from the mental health court that we now have in Sarasota, because the court provides the oversight needed to help people like my daughter stay in treatment. Another vital provision of this bill that would have saved my daughter so much torment is the integration of mental illness and substance abuse treatment.

I felt personally compelled to travel here today to plead with you to pass S. 1194. We can't let another mother helplessly watch her daughter deteriorate through the revolving door of the criminal justice system.