

Submitter: Ian Macrae

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Judiciary

Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB2467

Before I begin, I should explain that this story begins in another state whose policies toward those suffering from major mental illness are very similar to Oregon's.

Now let me tell you about my nephew O. He was a bundle of energy, so much so in fact that his caretaker found him impossible. Scolding and cursing him didn't work – she needed a better way to keep him quiet. Then one night she gave him a marijuana cigarette. That did the trick, he went quiet and stayed quiet. By the age of seven, O was stoned every day.

O soon discovered other drugs: LSD, booze and speed to name a few. But the highs came at a steep price. He began hearing voices, seeing things that weren't there. The voices were cruel and made him paranoid and angry. At the age of 17, O was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

After his diagnosis, a relative brought O to another town and paid for an apartment for him. He burned it down by accident.

Fast forward fifty years. O has been living on the streets of San Diego for decades now. Meth has now taken hold of his brain. His teeth are rotting. His mind is that of a dim ten year old. O sometimes sleeps over at the homes of a relative, but never for long as his paranoia and substance abuse always lead to some kind of trouble.

He sometimes gets a dose of medication from a local agency but the drug doesn't cure him or resolve his symptoms. (He refuses to let them try other medications out of fear of side effects.) He is in and out of jail, in and out of the emergency room, crisis centers and psychiatric hospitals. He never stays for more than a day or two but walks away and returns to life on the streets. Since he isn't suicidal or homicidal, no one can make him stay.

Housing has been offered several times but O always loses it because he fails to pay rent, gets into fights, and uses drugs and alcohol. Drug dealers have sometimes moved in to sell dope from his place. He no longer even tries to find housing.

O is now long, long past the days when anyone could imagine that he will somehow save himself. But the state still holds to the great old dream of rugged independence. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. But he has no more of those proverbial legs to stand on.

Fearing O would soon die without help I bring him to Salem where I am living. Things go well at first. I get him into a shelter where he has food, a safe place to sleep out of the rain. The shelter is connected with a local medical agency where he can get treatment and medication. I take him there and we fill out the forms, meet with a doctor and make a treatment plan. For the first time in ages, O has a chance, a tiny speck of hope.

But across the street from the shelter is a day center where the local homeless – and drug dealers – like to hang out. O soon discovers sources of pot and meth and starts using. He becomes paranoid again, hearing voices at the shelter calling him names. Before long he becomes aggressive and is kicked out of the shelter. I take him to the hospital and try to get him admitted but Oregon's standard is the same as California's: If he isn't suicidal or homicidal, they can't keep him. O goes back to the old habits and before long I find him passed out in a doorway in the cold and wet. I bring him back to my apartment to dry out but I know that my landlord won't let him stay. I lecture him sternly about his use of drugs and alcohol. He begs me to get him a ticket back to California. It's too cold here, he says. I relent and see him off at the AMTRAK station. O is now back on the streets of San Diego.

Oregon now has a chance to give men and women like O a chance at a meaningful life, a life away from the streets, away from crime and drugs and bad weather and disease. We have to wake up from the bad dream of the past fifty years of heartless and delusional public policies toward those suffering from schizophrenia and other diseases of the brain. Every addicted schizophrenic was once a child. Vote yes on HB2467.