

TESTIMONY BEFORE OREGON JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

HB 2467

Written Testimony
Hearing April 3, 2025

Testimony of Attorney Elizabeth Rich
President of Andrew's V.O.I.C.E., Inc.
www.andrewsvoice.org

V.O.I.C.E. = Victory Over Involuntary Commitment Excesses

My name is Elizabeth Rich. I am a Wisconsin attorney, and have been in private practice for 40 years. Since 2019, I have focused my practice on representing people subject to involuntary civil commitments and involuntary medication orders. During those years, I have represented more than 80 people whose constitutional rights were infringed and whose lives were devastated by a broken system that makes stripping people of their freedom, rights and minds far too easy.

I began this work when my son, Andrew Rich, took his life after being subjected to involuntary civil commitment and forced drugging for two and one-half years. Andrew was adjudicated mentally ill and dangerous in 2017, despite having no history of mental illness or violence in his family or personal history. His "dangerousness" was his decision to swim naked in a public river after dark. For this, he spent time in a state-operated mental institution, where he began a two and one-half year nightmare of periodic confinement and forced drugging. The psychotropic drugs he was forced to take were so strong that he could not have sex or taste food. He experienced constant headaches, dizziness, and memory lapses. The mind-numbing impacts of the drugs were so severe that he could not concentrate well enough to read a book, or build meaningful relationships, or carry on a normal conversation. He was committed, then re-committed, despite there being no reoccurrences of any problems and despite his demonstrated ability to hold a steady job and maintain a household. When a judge re-committed Andrew for a third time, my son took his own life. Andrew saw no end to the forced treatment, and he no longer wanted to live his life under those terms.

In 2019, I founded an advocacy group called Andrew's V.O.I.C.E. The acronym stands for "Victory Over Involuntary Commitment Excesses." I started representing others like Andrew, and learned their stories. I learned that very few of my clients were "dangerous" in any rational sense of that word. One woman was adjudicated "dangerous" because she threw a roll of masking tape in the direction of her father, from a distance of about 20 feet, during a family argument. Another young man was "dangerous" because he stuffed paper into the toe of his sock and threatened to strike a hospital worker with the sock if she attempted to restrain him. A third was "dangerous" because he was walking about in a northern Wisconsin winter wearing shorts. (One has only to observe the shirtless, shorts-wearing young men at any winter Packers football game to see numerous mental health commitment candidates there.)

I have a great deal of respect for our judicial system, and for the judges who serve it. Unfortunately, however, orders for mental commitment and involuntary medication are too often a rubber stamp. Over and over, I have observed that excessive deference to "expert" opinions results in involuntary commitments without due process of law. The hearings themselves might last 20 minutes or less, with little or no meaningful cross examination of medical experts. Many times, the "experts" in these cases examine a patient for only a few minutes before preparing reports diagnosing mental illness and recommending commitment. And under HB 2467, the "experts" can include interns or residents with no medical degree and scant experience in the field. What a nightmare for the person whose freedom depends on a fair and balanced hearing, with clear and objective evidence supporting the judge's conclusions.

It is my mission and passion to promote awareness of the problems with mental health laws (like proposed HB 2467), and to advocate for reform of the system that failed my son and is continuing to fail so many of the most vulnerable among us.

We can and must do better than this. I urge you to oppose HB 2467. Thank you.