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Testimony Before The Committee On Energy and Commerce

By Lisa M. Ashley

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me here today to tell of my son's experience with Emergency Department (ED)

I am a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner with a Master's degree in pediatrics and have practiced for 38 years.

But I am not here to testify in that capacity. I am here as a mother of an adult son who was diagnosed with Paranoid Schizophrenia 2 years ago. It is a long difficult and painful story like most.

My son was about 20-21 yrs. old when I knew something was wrong but it wasn't until he went homeless in LA and went missing for 3 weeks that I knew for sure. Of course he saw nothing wrong. When I was finally able to locate him, I brought him back to Sacramento. He was delusional, thinking the FBI was watching him, there were satellites in the sky that were monitoring his thoughts, having auditory hallucinations, could not hold a conversation, laughing to himself, not bathing or changing his clothes. Prior to this my son was extremely bright, received 740 out of 800 on his math SAT, was accepted to 7 Universities for mechanical engineering. His bizarre behavior went on for months. He refused to see a psychiatrist. He would see his primary medical doctor who was instrumental in having him 5150 two years ago. I felt helpless and extremely frustrated. Even calling the police did not help since they did not believe he was harm to himself or others.

I am specifically going to tell his story regarding his stay in hospital emergency departments (ED), three times over a two year period. (We have no Psychiatric Hospital ED and the Sacramento County closed the Crisis Unit 3 years ago.) Each time I struggled with such pain and anguish, to see my beautiful son taken into

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custody and especially the first time, because he didn't know how sick he was and was very confused as to why he could not go home with me. I cried my heart out.

The first time was in May of 2012. He had been sick for almost over a year before I was able to get him evaluated. I told him I was taking him to the hospital to have some blood test done that his doctor ordered. With the help of his primary medical provider and his colleague who was the psychiatric ED physician, we were able to get my son admitted to the ED quickly, placed in a room and placed on a 72 hour hold. His stay the first time in the ED was for approximately 12 hours. I couldn't believe they had to hold him there for that long, not knowing that there was a shortage of psych beds in the County. He was then transferred to a local psych facility and remained 2 weeks, just as long as my insurance would allow. Although it was very difficult for me to have my son hospitalized, knowing he was in good hands relieved some of my anxiety. But still it was nothing like I had ever been through and having to trust a system that is so foreign to you is difficult as well. I worried every minute.

The second time was not quite as smooth. In January 2013, my son had asked voluntarily to be taken to the hospital because "he felt his head was on fire", he was very anxious and distressed. I dropped everything, knowing that if he was asking to go, he must have felt pretty bad. I brought him to the same ED that morning. When we reached the triage nurse, I identified myself as an employee and a nurse practitioner. I explained my son was a paranoid schizophrenic and was in psychosis. I tried to remain calm as the triage nurses took his blood pressure and temp and then assigned him to a gurney in the hallway with at least 8 other patients which included children. All waiting to be seen by a doctor. It was not long before my son starting to get agitated and wanting to leave. The RN called the social worker to help intervene. She could not quiet him down. As he tried to approach the exit, an ED policeman tried to stop him by holding him back. His behavior then escalated. My son was screaming at him not to touch him (when schizophrenics are in psychosis they do not want to be touched). In front of all the children and adults waiting in the hallway, the police officer wrestled him to the ground and handcuffed him. I tell you this because I brought him to the hospital for medical treatment not for police handcuffing him, and their

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intervention escalated his psychosis and made it worse. If he had been able to go to some kind of psych facility, he would of gotten him medical attention rather than police attention. Doctors would have known how to deal with him, calm him down and isolated him from others. The ED is not a quiet place and they are more trained to deal with physical illness and not mental illness.

They then placed him on a gurny, put him in 4 point restraints and then medicated him. He was screaming obscenities at me telling me this was my entire fault. I was taken to another part of the ED with social worker to help calm me down. To see all this happen to someone you love, especially your own child is devastating and heart wrenching. Later the officer came by and just wanted me to know he was not going to press charges. That was not helpful and it made me even more upset that he even considered pressing charges.

My son was admitted on Friday morning and was in the ED, that whole day, all day Saturday, all day Sunday until late Monday afternoon because they could not find an open psych bed anywhere. He stayed in a room, tied to his bed for those 4 days and was heavily medicated. Seeing him helpless tied to a bed for days was like a nightmare. This was my son, and I was helpless except to keep him company and to try to reassure him that things would be alright. I was angry that they could not place him somewhere. I wondered, "Really, does it take that long to find a psych bed?" Finally on Monday, I was told there was an opening at a hospital in San Francisco, 100 miles East of Sacramento. They took him later that day by ambulance. He stayed there another 2 weeks and because I work full time I was unable to see him except on the weekend and speak with him on the phone daily. I could not be a part of his treatment because he was so far away and that was extremely frustrating. Why did he need to go away so far from the family member who cared and loved him? By the way if I did not have him on my insurance plan he would have waited even longer in the ED because this facility did not take Medi- Cal (Medicaid).

I complained to the hospital about how he was treated in the ED. The head Physician of the ED agreed with me and said that if they had been able to place

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him in a quiet room, given him some additional antipsychotics, he may have not even needed to be hospitalized at all. He said they would make some policy changes so this did not happen again. He said people don't recognize the pain in mental illness is just as bad as the pain with a gun wound, you just don't see it.

The third time he was hospitalized was last November 2013. Once again "his head was burning and the voices were screaming at him". I took him back to the hospital ED, told the Triage nurse he was a Paranoid Schizophrenic having a psychotic episode and once again they placed him on a gurney in the hallway. Fortunately it was quiet with no others but staff there. I was very upset; I was silly enough to think they really did change the policy. I insisted that they place him a quiet room and not leave him in the hallway like before, but I was told there were no rooms available and we would have to wait. Once again after a while he wanted to leave, this time 4 officers surrounded him but were able to talk him into staying and after several hours they then placed him in a room, tied him to the bed, sedated him. He was there for the entire day and most of the next. The only reason he was there for only 2 days that time is because in the months previous, I had made contact with a staff member at one of the local psych hospitals and, was able to call them and they made arrangements to transfer him there later that second day. He stayed another 3 days in the psych hospital. I was finally getting to know the system, but every time he becomes psychotic and I know I have no alternative but to bring him to the ED, knowing he will have a long stay, it upsets me, it shouldn't be so hard to get the right care you need at the right time in the right place.

Because of these experiences, my son has told me he will never again go willingly to the ED. I only hope and pray that we will not need to return.

My son has been fairly stable since November not requiring any additional hospitalizations but attends regular psychiatrist visits and takes his medications regularly. I pray every day that he continues to stay in treatment.

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Additionally, I attended a recent conference at this facility where they presented information about the effects on the ED as a result of the County closing beds (50 from 100 beds plus closure of the Crisis Unit). The staff stated that there was a 5 fold increase in the number of mentally ill patients admitted into the ED (1.3 to 4.4 patients per day) in 2012. In 2013 there were approximately 6.5 patients admitted per day and placed on holds with an average wait time of 40 hours before being placed in a psychiatric hospital somewhere in the State.

Thank for the opportunity to tell our story.