

Testimony of a parent - Bill Roberts  
DDAP Task Force, Philadelphia Public Hearing, December 6, 2016

My name is Bill Roberts and I live with my wife in Chester County. My testimony will be short and sweet. We sincerely applaud and thank you for your efforts, but based on experience do not feel optimistic or confident that much in our lives will change from these proceedings, for reasons outlined below.

We are parents of a child who went through hell to get to a place of sustained recovery. My wife and I went through hell, too. But, we are the lucky ones. Many of our fellow parents have not been so lucky. We attend funerals on a regular basis.

Society still views our children as “bad kids”, but they are sick not bad. Bad behavior is a symptom of the disease. We’re OK with you not liking them, but we abhor how society mistreats them. The system does little to help us so we began helping ourselves, starting our first parent meeting in Plymouth Meeting ten years ago, this week. Since then, 18 similar meetings have started up in and around SE PA. Our parents are teachers, iron-workers, physicians, hair stylists, single parents, lawyers, waitresses, CEO’s, coming from all socio-economic levels and every race, religion and political affiliation. We are simply parents of sick kids looking for answers and someone to hear us without judgment. Our meetings have been effective at guiding each other, based on our experiences, through the bureaucracy and stigma of addiction response, but ever since this opiate epidemic hit, our needs have become more acute, and we more desperate.

### **Background**

Parents are **traumatized** by their kid’s behavior and consequences. Any parent who has lived with an addicted child understands what that means. They lie, steal, betray and hurt us. When we finally figure out what is going on, the problem is usually beyond our ability to control. They get arrested, drop out of school, get fired and end up in hospitals after overdosing and jails after breaking laws. Medical experts liken our situation to living with a terrorist.

Next, we are **marginalized**, cut out of the decision process governing medical treatment. Well-meaning HIPAA laws puts decision making into the hands of doctors who don’t always know who their patient is. They may spend 15 minutes on an evaluation, write a script and say “next”, because they are prevented by law from talking to us about a family member who is incapable of following directions for their own care.

We are then **stigmatized** by a disease. I repeat, a disease, something we certainly didn’t want any more than any other illness. Family, friends, school administrators, employers, and total strangers label our kids a pariah and us as bad parents. We isolate and start to feel the guilt, blame and shame that stigma levies upon us. The vast majority of us simply suffer in silence.

And finally, we are **paralyzed**, unable to force them into treatment, unable to get them to stop using, unable to stop their bad behavior, unable to pay for all the incredibly expensive components of comprehensive treatment if they finally agree to go, and unable to kick them out of the house to live in the streets because we love them more than we love ourselves.

We fear that treatment of our kids will never be on par with that provided to other chronic, progressive, relapsing diseases until legislatures make up their minds to fund **comprehensive** treatment, or force insurers to handle addiction cases the same way they do all other diseases with a biological, genetic, environmental basis.

### Addressing “veiled” aspects of the problem – the family

30 days’ inpatient rehab, PHP or IOP is better than nothing, but still no more than a band-aid. Comprehensive treatment includes a thorough addiction and mental health assessment, intervention, detox if necessary, at least 90 days IOP, PHP or inpatient care, and aftercare for 12 months which includes ongoing therapy, relapse prevention, and measures to ensure accountability. The timeframe must be sufficient to allow brains to heal to the point where they can develop a healthy, recovering, esteem-building community and lifestyle. **THAT** would be equitable treatment for this terminal disease but it only materializes for the very wealthy or well insured.

Drug treatment courts, such as that of Judge Steven O’Neill in Montgomery County and elsewhere, have proven more effective than traditional treatment. Accountability is the key – something that parents have a very hard time enforcing. Lately, parents have become desperate enough to seriously consider ways to get their child arrested to get comprehensive treatment. Please don’t smirk. Parents in our groups are doing this to secure real, effective, ongoing treatment for as long as it takes for their child to transition from crisis to recovery. Since the courts are already overwhelmed, this makes little sense, but it shows how desperate parents have become.

My ‘ask’ – **our ask** - is simple: include parents in your “expert” discussions at our locations. This is an open invitation to anyone on the Task Force. Attendance varies between 15 and 50 parents and our meetings meet every day of the week except Saturday. We are open to everyone at no cost. We help parents secure professional services, provide them with basic education about what worked and didn’t work for us, and support each other to **reinforce new behaviors** to make families healthier for their kids to live in.

In almost every case we have seen, if the family doesn’t get it, the kids don’t get it either. Data proves conclusively that when the family gets therapy and is supported and educated about addiction and recovery, relapse and reincarceration rates are significantly lower. We are doing the best they can with the little we have. We receive no financial support and ask for none either, but we could use some recognition, administrative support, and educational materials for our members.

Until you – our representatives – support long-term treatment of addiction and related behavioral health with measures to ensure accountability (as they do in the drug court system), or alternatively, as society currently and so lovingly and financially does with patients with cancer, diabetes, heart disease or other chronic, terminal illnesses, we fear these proceedings will not be terribly helpful. Give them 30 days of treatment and a pat on the rear-end is woefully inadequate.

I want to reiterate my thanks for the work the Task Force is doing and for the opportunity to testify today. I hope that your efforts translate into positive, effective, and tangible improvement in this broken system. Please come to one of our meetings and talk to parents. We have much to offer towards the solution, and in the absence of adopting widespread comprehensive treatment services and more prison sentences, we may be all you have to stem the current tide of overdoses in our cities, towns, schools and local communities.

### Closing statement

Addiction needs comprehensive treatment, and that means **funding for long-term programs that work, and family support to ensure a healthy environment for kids to return to.**