Jason Sterling, HR 590 Testimony, Nov. 29, 2016

> Esteemed ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for allowing me to speak today. My name is Jason Sterling and I have dealt with an addiction to alcohol and also a bipolar disorder diagnosis. The two have been intertwined all of my adult life. I have ran into several barriers getting help for both. Let me explain.

> Before I started drinking at the age of 16, signs and symptoms of mental illness were already surfacing. They were never diagnosed and therefore never treated. I started therapy at 12 years old after the death of my father. I believe the signs of mental illness were starting. Now you may ask what that has to do with being a barrier to receiving treatment for addiction? Because had my illness been diagnosed and treated I believe my need to self-medicate would not have been as great had I been on the proper medications and receiving treatment. My illness was missed several times until I was finally diagnosed at the age of 33. I have accepted responsibility for my actions. But seeing as how roughly 1/2 of alcoholics and 1/3 of addicts have a mental illness before they drink or use, it would make a difference to address these issues when the signs first appear. Therein lies part of the problem. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania a child at the age of 14 is allowed to decide if they want to receive treatment for mental illness.

> Problem #1 - mental illness symptoms and signs typically don't start showing up in children until around the age of 14.

> Problem #2 - parents no longer have the ability to have a child treated even if the child needs it once they turn 14 unless the child chooses to do so.

> So what are possible solutions?

> #1 - allow a child to participate in their treatment but leave the final decision to the legal guardian until the child is 18.

> Here is my logic to this. If 1/2 of alcoholics and 1/3 of addicts have a mental illness before they ever use, treat the illness before it grows into a larger problem. I would consider this basic prevention and could greatly reduce the number of people who use before they ever pick up.

> Now this doesn't help with all those who are currently addicted. But I can speak to another issue regarding that. I don't know the specific statistics regarding inmates in correctional facilities who are there because of addictions but I know during a recent time in Crawford County Correctional Facility, due to my breaking a law. I spent time there. There were quite a few men I talked to who had some form of addiction, their behavior during their active addiction caused them to be incarcerated. But during my stay never did I speak with a therapist or addiction specialist. I don't remember ever seeing anyone from any 12 step recovery groups there either. I am aware that being in jail is punishment but it is also a great opportunity to reach those with addictions while they are out of active addiction.

> This would probably require having counselors in the jail a couple days a week. It would also require the cooperation between law enforcement, the community, and medical professionals all working

together to get those who have addictions that are in jail the help they need. Medically assisted treatment is happening but with no follow-up or additional support these men are leaving jail going right back to the lifestyle of using they were in when they went to jail. If we could be able to get these men and women connected with counselors and social workers and support and recovery groups on the outside before they were released we could have a greater chance of reducing relapses, or reoccurrences, after release. These men and women are detoxing while they are in jail. Why not take advantage of getting them help while their minds are clearer. Connect them with a rehab that they could go to as they leave jail. Allow judges to court-order treatment as part of their sentence. Including attendance at AA, NA, or Celebrate Recovery. Have counselors in the jails working proactively with community and government resources to have plans in place before an inmate is released so they stay clean.

> I believe wholeheartedly that it will take law enforcement, working hand in hand with the community, government agencies, and the faith-based community to start making positive changes in the fight against addiction in all forms. I believe this is happening but we need to increase the rate at which these groups are coming together and combining their resources. This is not a problem any one group can handle alone, or agencies and groups working separately. We all need to come together to combat this pressing issue. I thank you for your time today.

> I thank you for your time and attention, Jason Sterling