

Liz Fox Testimony, 9-7-16

Hi, my name is Liz Fox, I was asked to testify by Pro-A. I am a founding board member of AIM – Angels in Motion, a community outreach organization that meets the primarily homeless victims of addiction as well as mental illness in the streets where they live and provide assistance in many ways including resources for help when they are ready. Thank you for the opportunity to tell my son's story, the story of denial of service which led to his death. I know that my story is not unique, unfortunately I am one of probably hundreds of parents who could tell this story. My goal since Matt's death 2 years ago has been to speak up in an effort to prevent other parents from living my nightmare.

I hope to use this opportunity to tell you a story that will show the need for healthcare and reform in the area of substance user disorder treatment.

My 25 year old son, Matthew grew up in Bensalem, PA. He had mental health problems since the age of 13. He was medicated for Bipolar disorder as well as ADHD. Matt experimented with marijuana from a teen but nothing stronger. He discovered heroin at the age of 22 and quickly became a very low bottom addict, he even lived on the streets of Kensington in Philadelphia for up to 18 months. When I did take him back in he was still technically homeless because he was not welcome, but I just couldn't lay my head on the pillow at night knowing he was out there.

When I looked at my son, I did not see this victim of substance use disorder who shoplifted to feed his habit, who jumped over the El turnstile to get to his dealer... I saw the little 4 year old boy who gave the best hugs in the world and had a laugh that came from deep in his belly and made you laugh with him...

In January 2014 Matthew had gotten sloppy in his boosting, he ran out of stores to steal from that don't have security and ended up in a well-guarded Rite Aid. He was arrested.

The problem was that he was on probation in Bucks County so after his time in Philly, he was transported to face the Bucks County violations. In total, Matt served 8 months.

The week before Matt's release, I asked him what his aftercare plans were, he told me no one accessed him, they just set him up in an outpatient program. Anyone who understands this disease would know that a low bottom user, who has lived on the streets for a length of time was NOT a candidate for outpatient. He also had a history of doing very well with in patient. I started leaving phone messages for his PO in Bucks because going directly into rehab after his release was part of his Philadelphia probation. I begged this PO to please not release Matt, he HAS to go directly into rehab. The Probation Officer never returned any of my calls.

I am not singling out any county, I'm sure this could happen in almost any county jail across the state.

On Tuesday, September 9, 2014 Matt was eligible for release from Bucks County Correctional Facility, I picked him up.

What a joy to drive my son from Doylestown to my apartment in East Falls, Philadelphia, laughing, joking and helping him catch-up on what he had missed, even though we spoke on the phone almost every day. I thought this was a fresh start. The truth is, within hours of being home, Matt found his way to Kensington and with \$50 that he squirreled away on his commissary card from jail was able to buy heroin.

Matt quickly realized that this was a mistake, even though he continued to use, he knew he would be drug tested by his PO and would fail. He came to me and asked to get into rehab the day after he got out.

That began my journey to find him help. One by one they all said his private insurance provider will only approve him for out-patient. Every day from September 10th until the morning of September 16th he and I called facilities, I know it seems odd since it was an insurance issue and they were all going to say the same thing, but we were desperate; I had to believe that some rehab would listen to me and help regardless of our insurance company's policies. I was told that the reason for denial was that the insurance company considers jail-time as clean time and that was part of the decision.

On Tuesday, September 16, 2014, I worked from home so we could wait for the phone call from the very last facility that was going to get back to us. The phone rang and it was that rehab, I handed Matt the phone and I saw his posture slump as they told him, "You'll have to go somewhere else, we can't take you"

Matt sat at my MAC talking to friends on Facebook and looking so deflated... I said, "I love you, Matty" he turned around and said, "I love you too, Mommy" and then he got up and went into the bathroom, I was on a business call when I heard him collapse, I hung up, I hollered, I called 911, I watched them work on him for 30 minutes, and then I stood next to his hospital bed while we waited for the Coroner.

My son didn't have to die, he wanted help. To be honest most of his motivation was to not go back to jail, but you know what, I don't care what motivated him, I don't care if it was jail or a low bottom or losing his girlfriend or his job, when someone wants help, as human beings our job is to help!

If Matt was drowning in the Delaware, would we ask what his insurance was and make sure we had a confirmation to help him? If Matt was drowning in the Delaware, would we say, well, he knew it was a dangerous current, he did it to himself?? Matt was drowning and he was on a group health insurance plan which I paid \$250/month for because I knew if I signed up for the best insurance I would have NO problem getting him help when he was ready and that wasn't true. I was robbed. Who is a healthcare company to make a decision on the level of care a patient needs, especially when it completely contradicts the way the medical community recommends treatment should be handled.

Substance Use Disorder needs to be treated like any other disease. If Matt was prediabetic and he continued a poor diet until he finally became diabetic, would insurance companies refuse him treatment because... well... he was warned about this... he did this to himself...?

The discrimination shown to the victims of this disease is blatant. It's not just from healthcare companies, Matt's care was also disregarded at the jail. Instead of a full and proper assessment they ordered him to out-patient, like it was routine, like they were handing out mere paperwork. Instead of following the rules of probation of the previous county, who did access and determine that he was required to go to a rehabilitation facility, they made their own rules.

My life will never be the same, his 7 year old son, his step-dad and brother, his best friend since 1st grade, his Aunts and Uncles and cousin's lives will never be the same. I was driving to work on his 21st month anniversary and I said, wow, I have cried every single day for 21 months; not all day, but at some point I saw or heard something that made me think of Matt and cried.

I choose to use all of my energy in trying to prevent another parent from going through this. I need to know that Matt did not die in vain, that he gave his life to save others. I cannot do this alone and neither can AIM Angels in Motion, we need to unite to be the face of change in this epidemic.