

# **Testimony October 18, 2016 Public Hearing**

## **“Trouble with Accessing Treatment for Addiction”**

### **10/18/16 333 Market St, Hearing Rooms A & B 10:00AM**

**Stephanie Hastings, BA The Pennsylvania Recovery Organization-Alliance**

I would first like to start by saying what an honor it is to be here today to testify before the HR 590 Taskforce. I would like to share with you my experience, both personally and professionally, the challenges faced for those seeking treatment for their Substance Use Disorder. I first became aware of “addiction” when I was 12 years old, as my Uncle was a severe alcoholic. Throughout the years, many of my friends battled the same demons of substance use, their use being that of opiates. My uncle has been fortunate enough to live a life in recovery for 31 years. My friends, were not so fortunate, losing their lives to the disease of addiction. My most recent lost was on May 1, 2015 when my best friend’s sister overdosed on Heroin, found dead by her 3 year old daughter. It is of utmost importance that availability to treatment and recovery supports be not just accessible, but easily accessible. In Pennsylvania alone, 1 in 4 families are affected by addiction, everyone knows someone. It is of paramount importance that we equipped families with the information and resources to easily navigate through the system to get help for their loved ones, so that future lives can be saved and those that are currently suffering the tragedy of loss are able to heal.

As a Drug and Alcohol Therapist for nearly twenty years it has been my experience that it is not an easy task to get help for a loved one suffering from a Substance Use Disorder. Many do not even know where to start, nor are they aware of why their loved one’s behavior has changed. I can’t begin to express how many times I have heard “If they love me, they would stop.” Most families who are just beginning to face addiction don’t understand how their loved ones thinking has become so irrational, their behavior so erratic.....they are no longer the child or friend they have known. While we now have the understanding that substance use disorder is a disease of the brain, that is not making access to treatment any easier.

My mother was recently diagnosed with cancer and we experienced no issues regarding treatment, resources, payment for treatment. In fact, people were going out of their way to help us and get us the treatment she needs. So I pose this question, why is cancer different than substance use disorder? Both can result in death, both affect the entire family and support system. Are we going to tell someone who has had a recurrence of cancer, “sorry, you’ve already been treated for cancer and if we do offer you services again, you only get 21-28 days to get better?” I think not.....

As mentioned previously, being a Drug & Alcohol Therapist for decades, I have completed the authorizations and reauthorizations for medical assistance for treatment. The amount of information, unnecessary information, that was required to get SEVEN-FOURTEEN DAYS approved, only to repeat the process again and having to fight just to have an individual be able to receive treatment for 21-28 days is just not acceptable. Should an individual require longer than the standard 21-28 days, their chart needs to be reviewed by a doctor at the insurance company. They have never met this individual, they do not speak to the individual...their decision is based on notes taken by the MA caseworker, and most times there is a 24-48 hour waiting period to receive a response, and rarely is extended time approved. In most cases, insurance companies are looking for the least restrictive form of care, whether it meets the needs of the individual or not. I lost one of my closest friends because their medical assistance felt that outpatient was the best course of treatment. Some families are able to pay out of pocket for treatment, where they are paying outrageous fees in an effort to access treatment and save their loved one, most people are not that fortunate.

This is not something that is acceptable for any other medical condition. My mother was not put on hold for her cancer treatment, nor was there a limit on how much or how long she could receive treatment. So why is this acceptable for treatment for substance use disorders?

Substance Use Disorder is a progressive disease and too often family members sit around and wait for their loved one to seek help on their own, which typically does not occur until the disease has progressed so significantly....if at all. I have heard time and time again that a person has to be ready for treatment in order for it to be effective. In my time as a therapist, I have found this to be highly inaccurate. Individuals that I have worked with have all reported that even after their first treatment experience, they were never able to use the way they did before treatment....they always take something away from the opportunity and are not able to think about using the same as they had previously.

For a period of my career I worked with individuals who entered treatment for loved ones or law enforcement and despite their initial resistance to treatment, they began to understand that their addiction was that of a disease. The problem with this was by the time I started to make headway, they were being discharged from treatment because their insurance would not pay any longer. A large majority of individuals in treatment are dealing with trauma and or co-occurring disorders along with their addiction and these are not issues that can be resolved in a 21-28 day treatment. It takes time to establish a therapeutic relationship and by the time this relationship has been established, the individual is being discharged.

To combat the struggles with addiction, once an individual is discharged from treatment they are not provided appropriate resources to learn how to be successful in their recovery, because there are not adequate resources available. Yes, it is true that an individual needs to take ownership of their recovery, but this often does not happen until much later in the recovery process. We need to provide not only the individuals with the time necessary for effective treatment, but also families with the knowledge of what coverage they have and what their rights are. Far too many families are unaware of what their insurance covers, let alone if their

plans are covered by ACT 106 of 1989. Families need to be made aware of their insurance coverage and those in need of treatment need to receive the amount of coverage to effectively treat the progressive disease of addiction. We are all human beings who deserve the opportunity to live a healthy life, recovery is beautiful.....let's give individuals a chance to experience this by providing the time in treatment necessary.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. This is a worthy cause. Recovery is happening every day for many in our communities, it may not be easy, but it is possible and it is happening.

Stephanie Hastings, BA  
Recovery Services Community Coordinator,  
The Pennsylvania Recovery Organization - Alliance