

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION OF
SB 480 - Mental Health Law-Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs
Finance Committee

Thank you Chair Griffith, Vice-Chair Klausmeier and committee members for the care and effort that you have put into improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services for Marylanders of all ages. My name is Huck Talwar, and I am writing to you as a patient, peer, and professional.

I am in strong opposition to SB 480 - Mental Health Law-Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs. If passed, this bill would subject thousands of Marylanders to court-ordered outpatient treatment (forced mental health treatment in the community), where noncompliance would result in emergency evaluation for involuntary commitment. I am writing you today to share

Involuntary commitment, court-ordered outpatient treatment, or other types of forced treatment often lead to long-term negative psychological effects—especially trauma and PTSD—on people who are already struggling with their mental and behavioral health.

The first time I was emergency petitioned into the hospital, I was violently handled by a police officer that handcuffed me in front of my mother, who cried like I have never seen before—all because I did not want to take a certain medication. My mother and I both still have nightmares about that day. My first time in an inpatient unit, staff strip searched me on a daily basis on the “hunch” that I was self-harming; they never found any evidence, but they kept strip searching me for two weeks straight. While this treatment is humiliating in general, it was worse for me as a transgender man with C-PTSD that stems from sexual assault. On the same unit, I was subjected to violence and racism at the hands of another patient.

I transferred units shortly after, but my hope was quickly diminished by the treatment I received on the new unit, too. Up at 5am for a six-minute shower. I remember one day I went to seven minutes and was dragged out of the shower room, naked, in front of all the other patients (we were in an eating disorders unit, so this was especially harmful to all the patients therein). To this day, I take six-minute showers for fear of punishment. There was little-to-no procedure when one of the 15 patients with PTSD dissociated or had a flashback. I have seen some of my best friends dragged limp and seemingly lifeless across the floor while the rest of us tried our best to finish our meals (we did not). I remember being name-called by staff, being the butt of fat jokes, and being treated like a criminal by staff.

Some of the worst parts of my experiences being involuntarily hospitalized dozens of times are the fact that my treatment team would not let me have a say in my treatment plan and I had no resources upon discharge. My psychiatrists made changes to my medication without telling me and punished me if I refused to take the medications I knew nothing about. I lost visitation, phone, bathroom, and outside privileges. When they finally got sick of me not getting better, I was discharged with a brown paper bag of my belongings and a wave goodbye. I had no follow-ups, no doctors in place, no team to continue treatment... It was truly terrifying, feeling so alone and vulnerable. Not only this, but it felt as if I had wasted my life in a hospital that did not even help me.

There are things within the behavioral health system that helped me, like my peers, my own chosen outpatient providers, safe environments, trust from my providers, and the freedom to start, change, and stop treatment whenever I wanted to. Now, my providers work together to support me and compromise with me so I can live the best life possible.

After that first hospitalization, though, I lost trust in my providers. I lost faith in the behavioral health system. I gained fear of both. I did not get treatment for a long time afterwards because I did not want to be subjected to that kind of abuse anymore. And things got worse and worse until I was forced back in the hospital walls again and again, gaining new trauma every time. Senate Bill 480 will not only put more people in humiliating circumstances, but will negatively impact their identity, autonomy, dignity, and self-respect. I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 480 because of the risk of traumatizing and retraumatizing individuals with serious mental illness.