

**Testimony to the Pennsylvania Senate**

**Public Health and Welfare Committee**

**Presented by Mary C. Kohut**

**Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers' Association**

**Harrisburg**

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Good Morning. My name is Mary Kohut, I am a mental health consumer, and a member and Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers' Association, PMHCA. On behalf of the organization, I am here to express that we do not support Senate Bill 226. While I typically do not share of my own story in testimony because "war stories" are not helpful, I feel that it is important to do so with regard to the proposed legislation, as I believe this would have impacted the course of my mental health recovery.

When I was a young adult, I tried to kill myself. Obviously, I was not successful, nor did I get "caught" by the system, lucky for me, and for you since you get the benefit of hearing my testimony today. I know that this spared me the trauma of manipulation and coercion experienced by many of my peers. I spent the next 20 years vacillating between waiting and wanting to die and during that time I found some refuge in sitting with people who were dying. Finally at the tender age of 41, I experienced losses that stripped the final threads that kept me truly connected to this world. It is only by grace that I became part of an organization, or should I say a community of human beings, PMHCA, that didn't just save my life, but showed me that I can have a life, that I am worthy, and that I have value. My peer supports believed in me and my life, and eventually I began to believe in

myself too. In the last six years, I can honestly say that I'm not just surviving, but living and thriving. This is what helps.

I have not been forced into treatment and so I will leave that testimony to my peer and colleague, Anne Alter. But what I will tell you is what helps and what does not help. I speak these words, not only from my own experience, but from the multitude of stories that I have heard from our members. And please note, that those of us who have walked this journey, we are THE EVIDENCE that recovery from mental and emotional distress is a reality.

Without question, FORCE does not help, coercion does not help, trying to convince me that you, or anyone else knows what you "think" I need, does not help. These are the elements of the proposed Senate Bill 226, the relics of a broken system referred to in the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health Final Report. There are studies, such as the Rand studies that support this and I will not waste my time, nor yours spouting statistics and numbers that we all know can be bought and sold by the highest bidder and recipient.

So what does help? Humanity, connection, and relationship; someone who can hear me, encourage me, and believes that I can be well. This bill presupposes that those of us who experience mental and emotional distress do not want to be well – that is not our truth, it is one that has been concocted by a society that does not seem to have the time or resources for PEOPLE. It is a myth, and I might call it a delusion that our collective society has created in order to garner some false sense of security. The fact remains, that statistics support that we are far more likely to be the "victims" of violent crimes than the perpetrators, more likely to give up on ourselves than harm another. I ask you, why

is it that we are wasting resources on amending an act, that is perfectly sound as it is, and not channeling the proposed resources to bolstering community services that that we need and want?

We need and want a system that recognizes us as valuable citizens who have something to offer our communities, instead of being viewed as “problems” that need to be fixed. We want to be able to work with our doctors as partners to achieve the maximum benefit of health and well being, and not just have medications thrust upon us without true informed consent. We should not be driven to crisis and force because the help that we need and want is not available – real help that considers physical as well as mental and emotional issues that may be causing the difficulties. Most importantly we need to work with peers who have been successful in achieving their recovery because they have an expertise that most professionals do not have.

I quote from The President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health Final Report, “Today’s mental Health care system is a patchwork relic – the result of disjointed reforms and policies...the Commission recommends a fundamental transformation of the Nation’s approach to mental health care. This transformation must ensure that mental health services and supports actively facilitate recovery, and build resilience to face life’s challenges. Too often, today’s system simply manages symptoms and accepts long-term disability.” The system is fragmented and broken and our collective focus should be on healing it rather than traumatizing and punishing people.

The members of PMHCA have worked hard in partnership with other stakeholders, including the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS), to break ground in transforming an antiquated mental health system in Pennsylvania. The

transformation is attentive to safety but more importantly, what it holds is the promise of a life for people experiencing mental illness. I don't think I need to remind you that that there are certain truths that we hold to be self evident..."life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Please ponder these words as you contemplate this bill.

If in fact, I do pose harm to myself or others, the current mental health procedures act addresses that – no amendment necessary. To go any further in terms of amending this act falls dangerously close to science fiction. At the risk of sounding "paranoid" and posturing myself as a prime candidate for the proposed forced outpatient treatment, I pose that Senate Bill 226 proposes measures that all too well resemble the plot line of the movie Minority Report. I say this tongue in cheek, however; that which is being proposed is akin to "pre- crime" in the movie where pre-cognitive entities would "predict" who was going to commit a crime in the future. Who among you, has the ability to know what I'm going to do tomorrow, let alone, what you're going to do tomorrow; beyond what you might have listed on your "crackberry." Are there oracles that the legislature has stationed and ready to flawlessly perform the tasks outlined in this bill? Is this my paranoia or yours? Whose paranoia is this and what exactly are we going to do with that?

Just imagine yourself, for one moment....lost....feeling very much alone...

Need a friend? Someone who will take the time to listen and understand?

You're not going to find one in Senate Bill 226.