

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare:

Last Thursday at the public testimony on S287, we heard story after overwhelming story of pain and health system failure. Take for example, Christina Schumacher's testimony. If you can listen past her palpable anger and focus on the description of her hospital experience, can you seriously claim that Vermont is currently ready to lead the nation? When, after leaving the hospital, a patient aspires to be an attorney rather than a therapist, the system is beyond broken.

S.287 gives this dysfunctional system yet greater power to quickly force patient compliance. Its proponents mistake the coerced acquiescence thus achieved for genuine, long lasting insight. Long hospital stays are expensive. Long term involuntary treatment in the community is more expensive and less effective than voluntary community treatment, both in dollars and when the cost is measured in human suffering. If providers lack the skills to connect with people experiencing crisis, high rates of involuntary treatment will preclude high quality, affordable mental health care.

Initial treatment should focus on forming long lasting, supportive emotional connections with patients, connections which endure beyond hospital discharge and remain strong even in the midst of the next psychotic episode, should it occur. By combining hospitalization and medication hearings, S.287 would eliminate a crucial opportunity to connect with a patient during the peak of his or her crisis. The prescription to fix our ailing mental health system should be less initial reliance on drugs and greater reliance on personal connection, especially during this crucial early period of involuntary hospitalization.

I have nine years of public mental health system experience as a provider and proponent of this voluntary connection based approach. I would be delighted to speak with you at greater length about it, and to share my own stories from locked wards. Remember the woman from Robert Macauley's testimony who repeatedly refused treatment, later dying from starvation after subsisting for months entirely on apples?  
If only someone had connected with her in this enduring way, she would likely still be among the living.

Anne Krauss