

This is the tragic story of a young Ventura County man who was failed by Ventura County's healthcare system. His story is not unique.

He was only 22 when he began suffering from auditory and visual hallucinations, responding to voices and visions that weren't there. He didn't believe he was ill. Paranoid and delusional, his thinking was disordered. He answered every question with, "I like to swim." At times, he became violent. He was suffering from all the hallmarks of schizophrenia.

His single mom knew he was sick and tried to get help. Law enforcement deemed him gravely disabled, unable to care for himself and/or a danger to others. Over the course of the next two years, between 2018 and 2020, he was deemed gravely disabled and 5150'd 8 times. His hospitalizations ranged from 3 – 12 days, with the exception of Ventura's Hillmont psychiatric unit, where he stayed over 30 days and received the most problematic care. With all these hospitalizations, he never received effective treatment and support to prevent relapse. He was sent to 6 different hospitals outside of Ventura County where no information about previous treatment attempts was shared, causing him to be given medications that had already been attempted and failed. At every turn, his mother begged for help, begged that they keep him in the hospital, that he receive the right treatment for his illness. Each time, he was discharged too soon, without proper medication, and without supports for his long-term recovery. During the course of all these hospitalizations and discharges, this young man became homeless. His story is not unique.

This is the normalized pattern of a failed mental health system, a status quo held up by all responsible parties who have a hand in decision making around this system, from federal policymakers, to state legislators and county Supervisors. They refuse to look at this system. Politicians continue to pass the buck and absolve themselves of accountability, banking on society's collective inhumanity to give them a pass for such failures. This is an expensive failure as well, as untreated serious mental illness costs taxpayers billions of dollars every year. From misguided and inhumane state laws, to local policymakers making uneducated decisions profoundly affecting the lives of the seriously mentally ill and their families, we have doomed this young man and so many others like him to a life dependent on a system that cycles him in and out of countless hospitalizations, incarcerations, and homelessness. Our County failed this young man the moment he stepped foot in the Adventist Health Simi Valley emergency department.

Those responsible for these consequential decisions claim that individuals who suffer with the most disabling of chronic brain diseases have a civil right to choose a life of delusions and psychosis, even though, in reality, because these individuals receive no meaningful treatment for their illness, they lack the capacity or competence to make informed decisions about their care and they lack the ability to exercise a foundational understanding of civil liberties. Decision makers who hide behind the "civil liberties" argument to systematically deny treatment to those with serious mental illness do not understand the reality of the illness. Their actions reinforce stigma and discrimination. Failure to provide treatment to the seriously mentally ill on par with all others who suffer from illness is pure discrimination. This young man didn't believe he was ill. At least half of the seriously mentally ill don't seek treatment voluntarily because they don't believe they are sick. A compassionate and civil society intervenes to help and legislators and Supervisors who possess wisdom, understanding, and compassion advocate for laws that allow treatment and recovery; they don't sabotage the right to a sane life by arguing for the right to remain psychotic.

Serious mental illness is a disease that can be treated and people can do well if given the appropriate medication and support. This young man's latest hospitalization at Ventura's Hillmont psychiatric center exposed enormous gaps in Ventura County's continuum of care for the seriously mentally ill. Hillmont doctors prescribed a medication, Abilify, that the previous 6 hospitals had already determined was ineffective for this young man. The County finally agreed to grant a conservatorship, a painstaking process initiated by his mother, meaning that because he was so ill, the Ventura County Public Guardian would be responsible for ensuring his treatment and support. He entered Hillmont with an open wound from an auto accident he caused while psychotic. Hillmont failed to follow specific wound care instructions given to them and he developed a staph infection requiring a 5 day hospitalization at Ventura County Medical Center (VCMC). He had developed a large abscess on his leg that was clearly not being treated. When his mother spoke to a Hillmont psychiatrist about Hillmont's failure to treat her son's wound, he grinned and laughed.

While at VCMC, the County agreed that he was still gravely disabled and 5150'd him again. However, they terminated his conservatorship stating that he was a "no show" at the hearing - he couldn't be at that hearing because he was recovering from the infection caused by Hillmont's negligence.

After VCMC, he went back to Hillmont where they isolated him, gave him the wrong medication and he became violent. He was immediately thrown in jail and charged with a felony. Hillmont is a psychiatric hospital. The charge of Hillmont is to accept and treat people who are so ill they have been determined to be gravely disabled and/or a danger to self or others. Hillmont knew that when left untreated, he was prone to violence. After his jail discharge, the Public Guardian sent him to a bedbug-infested board and care in Oxnard with no plan for his treatment and no medication support.

His mother contacted the Public Guardian and asked how they planned to provide for her son's care. The County Counsel's office told her that, "the Public Guardian staff are just government employees; they don't know anything about serious mental illness."

Does this look like a mental healthcare system that is working? Our community should be aware of this inhumane system. Until we provide science-based and data-driven treatment, the seriously mentally ill will continue to be warehoused in jails, imprisoned in a mind of delusion and disordered thinking, doomed to a life without civil liberties and freedoms. Ventura County's Hillmont is just a holding station, it doesn't provide treatment meant to stabilize and create wellness. Our County works, instead, to find excuses to get rid of patients, send them out of the County, and then jail them.

One third to one half of all jail and prison inmates are seriously mentally ill. At least a third of all homeless are seriously mentally ill. We spend millions in Ventura County on "anti-stigma" campaigns and holding up a system that is failing miserably and has terrible health outcomes for the seriously mentally ill. Families are forced to drive far distances to support their loved ones upending lives and livelihoods. The inability to see another's humanity allows validation in denying rights, dignity, care and respect. Ventura County decided that this young man was not worthy of rights, dignity, and basic humanity.

We must demand accountability and change, for the gravest injustice is knowing all of this and doing nothing.