



TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

SB0453: Mental Health- Emergency Evaluation and Involuntary Admission Procedures and Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs

POSITION: Support

BY: Linda Kohn, President

DATE: February 20, 2024

The League of Women Voters believes that all U.S. residents should have access to affordable, quality behavioral health care. It supports access to safe and stable housing for people with behavioral health challenges, and feels that specialty courts, including mental health courts, can provide needed treatment and avoid inappropriate entry into the criminal justice system.

For those reasons, the League supports **Senate Bill 453: Mental Health- Emergency Evaluation and Involuntary Admission Procedures and Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs.**

Individuals with serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia must adhere to required medication regimens and follow-up care in order to stay stable and well. **But some patients are unable to comply with treatment voluntarily, and do poorly in the community.** After stopping medications, their symptoms return, which can lead to repeated cycles of homelessness, involuntary hospitalization, arrest, and incarceration. They can engage in violent behavior directed at themselves or others, resulting in suicide or homicide.

Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) is a court-ordered comprehensive mental health care program designed for patients with severe chronic mental illness and a history of non-compliance with voluntary outpatient treatment. If a judge reviews an individual's behavior and treatment history and determines that AOT is needed, the individual would be ordered to participate in up to one year of court-supervised treatment while continuing to live in the community.

Research has shown that AOT programs are effective and are less expensive and restrictive than involuntary hospitalization or incarceration. Care coordination services within AOT provide housing, employment, and educational assistance, in addition to behavioral (and physical) health treatment. "Studies have consistently found lower rates of rehospitalization, arrest, re-arrest, incarceration, homelessness, violence, and suicide for participating patients living in their communities under AOT orders for six months or longer."¹

Maryland is one of only three states without Assisted Outpatient Treatment programs. Maryland residents, families, and communities would greatly benefit from passage of this legislation. The League of Women Voters, representing 1,500+ concerned members throughout Maryland, urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 453.

¹ https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/16964/mhf2-assisted-outpatient-treatment-jan-2020.pdf