

**Examining H.R. 2646, the Helping Families  
in Mental Health Crisis Act  
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY  
2322 Rayburn House Office Building  
June 16, 2015, 10:00 a.m.**

**Thank you so much Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for allowing me a bit of time with you today. And thank you to Congressman Murphy for his efforts to bring mental health issues to the forefront and develop solutions to help families in crisis throughout the United States.**

**When formulating my thoughts about what I wanted to speak about today, how best to use my time, I thought about all of the very compelling stories that have been shared with me from Virginians and people from throughout the United States. Honestly, I thought what could be more compelling than the loss of those innocent lives in Newtown, the moviegoers in Aurora, the bright emerging leaders at Virginia Tech, or the dedicated public servants at Navy Yard?**

**In Virginia, we tinkered around the edges of public policy following tragedy, but the real reform and meaningful work remains. But if we did not act after all of those unspeakable tragedies, what could I possibly say today to press upon you the importance of acting. The importance of coming together and finding solutions, many of which are here before you in HR 2646.**

**In addition to each of those high profile cases involving large losses of life, there are tragedies of smaller scales.**

**You can read about Natasha. A woman with mental illness who ends up in jail instead of a mental health treatment facility that can properly care for someone with a mental illness.**

**When the jail attempts to transfer her, six members of law enforcement in biohazard suits handcuff, shackle, and place a face guard on her. When she refuses to bend her knees and sit in a transport chair, she is tazed. Multiple times. And she dies. If she was in a mental health facility and needed to be sedated, the staff would have had appropriate options.**

**I can only imagine what she was thinking and feeling when all of those men entered her cell in spacesuits. And I can only imagine how much grief and pain her family is enduring today.**

**You can read about Christian. A 17 year old boy with a knife, threatening suicide. Law enforcement was called to the scene. And when the boy made movements toward the officer, he was shot dead. I can only imagine the shock and horror of his friend that called for help.**

**Tragedies happen every day that involve someone in a mental health crisis. Most do not make the news. I've heard so many – and those stories serve to guide me in my review of the mental health system in Virginia. The heartbreak is unbearable. I hear these stories all of the time. People reach out to me for help every day. And the sad truth is that in many ways there is little I can do to help. The system is not set up in a way that encourages advocacy.**

**One of the primary issues is HIPAA. We came together in a bipartisan way in Virginia to adopt meaningful reforms last year and to some extent during the 2015 Session. But nothing we do can circumvent HIPAA. I need – the states need – the federal government as a partner in reforming the mental health system.**

**Government was not envisioned to work quickly. And we are geared toward incremental policy changes. But I am telling you, the time for action is now. Families are struggling. People are dying. Families are grieving.**

**While there is no panacea, there are things to be done to improve the lives of those with mental illness, promote better outcomes, and to help give some relief to families who are struggling every day.**

**We can accomplish this without jeopardizing the civil liberties of those with mental illness.**

**And while I do not like to speak about my own situation, I will end briefly talking about Gus. No legislative action either here in DC nor in Virginia will bring back my son. But hopefully it will help others to keep their loved ones safe.**

**I have four precious children. My three daughters continue to make me prouder every day. But I have forever lost my son. I worked within the mental health system to help Gus when he began showing signs of mental illness. He was brilliant; everyone in this room would envy his adeptness in picking up languages, his knowledge of religion, his ability to play any instrument he'd pick up, and his kindness and gentleness to his fellow man. My world was shaken to its core when he began showing signs of delusional thinking and sporadic behavior. I was not equipped with the knowledge or the information to help him.**

**HIPAA prevented me from accessing the information I needed to keep him safe and help him towards recovery. Even though I was the one who cared for him, fed him, housed him, transported him, insured him, I was not privy to any information that could clarify for me his behaviors, his treatment plan, and symptoms to be vigilant about. I did not know his diagnosis, prescription changes, and necessary follow-up. I had sought to have him**

**hospitalized earlier, so he was wary of my having any information. So I was in the dark as I tried to advocate for him in the best way I could with the best information I had.**

**The last time I tried to hospitalize him, he was turned away. We ran out of time, and law enforcement had to release him.**

**We have to do better. Not for me. Not for the countless other families who have already buried their loved ones. But for those who still struggle with mental illness and the families that struggle to help them. They are crying out for help. They are desperate. They are exhausted. And they need your leadership.**

**Thank you.**