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April 13, 2017

To: Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

RE: County Budget Hearings, April 17, 2017.

Ongoing Funding for Assisted Outpatient Treatment Pilot Project Year 2

Honorable Supervisors,

Few would argue with that Santa Barbara County's mentally ill population, taken as a whole, has been adequately served over the last decade.

One of the primary variables that accounts for this fact is the difficulty of providing treatment to someone who does not think they need it. Hundreds of people in our county need our mental health services but do not receive them due to the fact that they are living in an alternate reality in which they do not perceive themselves as ill, or in which no one can be trusted. HIPAA laws protect the right of an individual to become completely isolated in a world of their own and, in the worst case scenario, to act out with hostility or self-destruct before our very eyes.

Things have to progress to quite a serious level before a person in this condition is involuntarily hospitalized in an acute psychiatric bed. Alternatively, when the time and effort is put in to locating someone who has been referred to the AOT program, and a bridge of trust is carefully built, they are offered treatment or housing or assistance in reconnecting with their family, friends and community, and absolute miracles can happen. The healing process may require a stay in a psychiatric ward, but if the engagement process persuades the individual to voluntarily access treatment, hospitalization may be averted.

Almost one year ago, in May of 2016, the County Board of Supervisors approved a three-year Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) or Laura's Law pilot project to serve up to 10 persons at a time. The actual program was deployed in January of this year, less than three months ago. To date almost 20 county residents have benefited by having been gently offered an opportunity to interact with someone who is patient and skilled enough to take the time to respectfully "engage" them, under the provisions of this law.

Yesterday, a progress report on our AOT Pilot Program was provided by Behavior Wellness staff member, Tammy Summers, to the County's Crisis Action Team, which includes staff or representatives from Cottage and Marian Hospitals as well as Dignity Health, representatives from Restorative Policing and the Sheriff's Crisis Intervention Training program yesterday. The report demonstrated how well this approach has been

working since it was launched in January of 2017.

Skillful outreach workers have been able to invite individuals to ask for and receive the kind help with housing, health, etc. that will enable them to survive and thrive, possibly saving a life, and saving our city, our county and our hospitals thousands of dollars currently spent on law enforcement, incarceration, ambulance rides and court fees.

The patient, compassionate "engagement" process afforded to them under Assisted Outpatient Treatment is already paying off, before any of them has even been referred to a judge. Men and women who have been living in their own very separate reality for years and often caught in a cruel revolving door of repeated encounters with law enforcement, incarcerations and periods of homelessness due to their severe mental health disorders, have successfully been invited to begin to reconnect with the community and begin the process of healing.

We at Families ACT! are personally witnessing profound transformations in individuals who lived for years on the streets and/or cycled through the painful process of repeated arrests and incarceration. We have, frankly, been surprised and impressed by the skill of the staff assigned to the AOT program and simply amazed at the results.

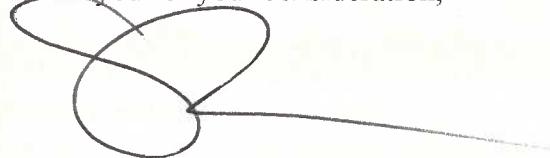
This is exactly what has been lacking in our County's "continuum of care" for years!

It is imperative that this pilot program receive continued funding and run for the intended duration of three years, at which time the results in term so of lives saved and savings in dollars can be analyzed, and a decision made whether to make the AOT program part and parcel of the services offered by our County.

San Francisco's Department of Public Health recently issued a 2-year report documenting that incarcerations were reduced by 74% and involuntarily hospitalizations by 64% in the population served by Assisted Outpatient Treatment. If we see the kind of data that has come out of similar programs in San Francisco and Los Angeles, we will be glad we made the decision to adopt the three-year pilot program.

It is disturbing that our Director of County Behavior Wellness has refused to see the value of this program, and has apparently offered it up on the chopping block. We urge you to listen to the families of those directly affected and to ensure continued funding for the program at an adequate level, commensurate with what it has cost in other counties.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Suzanne Riordan
Executive Director
Families ACT!