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November 15, 2008

Governor-Elect Bev Perdue
P.O. Box 12086
Raleigh, NC 27605

Dear Governor-Elect Perdue:

Congratulations on winning the election. I look forward to your Democratic leadership. I know that you are busily preparing to honor your campaign promises to improve the availability and quality of mental healthcare in North Carolina.

Particularly for those suffering from schizophrenia and living in the western part of the state, the severe shortage of psychiatric care is creating hardships, including life threatening situations for many. Adding to the shortage, Dr. Corinne Belsky, the psychiatrist who has been treating my son while he is a graduate student at Western Carolina University, is closing her office in Sylva because it is no longer financially feasible for her to continue her practice. There is only one other psychiatric clinic within an hour's drive that will take Medicaid patients. There is already a two to three month wait for an appointment there, and this wait will now increase. For those with private insurance, psychiatric care is also scarce.

With lives in the balance, we cannot wait for politicians and policymakers to argue and negotiate over ideology and strategies to revamp the total mental healthcare system. Emergency action is warranted now.

A simple and logical response is to authorize immediate educational and healthcare funding to set up a satellite outpatient clinic of the UNC Schizophrenia Treatment and Evaluation Program (STEP Clinic) at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee.

The UNC STEP Clinic in Chapel Hill provides consistent, high quality care for very ill patients and at the same time provides training for psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, and nurses. Even as the North Carolina mental healthcare system has collapsed, the STEP Clinic has continued to provide the type and quality of care that anyone should be able to receive anywhere in the state, not just in Chapel Hill. I know this because three of my sons have been patients there, including my son who is now a graduate student at WCU.

This son, like many others, relies on medication that entails serious side effect risks and requires him to have his health carefully monitored. The antipsychotic

clozapine is a critical component of his care and requires him to have blood work done every month. Many doctors will not take patients who require clozapine because of the close monitoring it requires, but without this drug, he will quickly become very ill. There would be no guarantee that any amount of medical care at that point could restore his health and sanity. He could require a long term hospitalization, very likely at great expense to the state.

My son has struggled with his illness for ten years, but he is quite courageous, and he is determined to get on with his life. He has worked hard, and he is now on his way to earning a masters degree and building a future for himself that includes becoming a taxpayer. But we need our government to do its part to make this possible.

Schizophrenia is a devastating, incurable brain disease that is two times more prevalent than Alzheimer's disease, and more prevalent than autism, striking approximately one out of one hundred people. This illness can strike anyone, with onset generally occurring in the teens and twenties, just as the patient is entering adulthood. In Canada, it is known as "Youth's Greatest Disabler." It is also highly treatable if care is available. That has been our experience.

The sheer number of patients and their families struggling to cope with schizophrenia is alarming. The pervasive societal stigma and misperceptions associated with the disease envelop these patients and their families, making them reluctant to speak about their problems. The denial of care further isolates them in their pain, causing them to feel cast out and abandoned by our community. The refusal of the larger community to acknowledge that the ongoing denial of care for so many is a form of societal neglect and abuse enables this travesty of justice to occur in our state everyday.

The good news is that with proper care, including medical care, medication management, cognitive behavioral therapy, community support, substance abuse treatment, proper educations, and vocational rehabilitation, people with serious and persistent mental illness can be included as valuable members of our community.

My hope is that with your informed Democratic leadership, justice will prevail, and care will be forthcoming. Establishing a UNC STEP Clinic in the western part of the state would be a good start.

For your information, I am enclosing information about schizophrenia.

As one mother to another, I ask you please to act quickly. Lives are at stake.

Sincerely,

Joanna Bowen

Enclosures