

After 11 and a half months, Aaron's case was concluded in Hamilton County criminal court this week. While we are grateful for the legal process to be over, his mother and I are not pleased by the outcome, nor by the way the case was handled. We want to be clear that we are not blaming or pointing a finger at any particular person or groups of persons within the system. Rather, it is the criminal justice system itself, in this state, that failed Aaron and continues to fail individuals like him with mental health issues who find themselves caught up in the system. The purpose of this statement is to share our experience and illustrate why reforms are desperately needed to address this situation.

From the moment Aaron was arrested last August, it should have been obvious that this was an individual with mental health issues. The police report of the incident practically screamed that out. Within a few weeks, after his initial hospitalization at Moccasin Bend and his past history was made known, it most certainly was clear that this was an individual who needed treatment, not incarceration.

However, his bond was set at an absurdly high amount — \$400,000 — precluding us from getting him out for treatment, and the process continued to drag on, for months, through General Sessions Court, before we got to start all over again in Criminal Court. Again, I want to emphasize that Aaron was well-treated while incarcerated, and the officials at the Hamilton County Jail were aware of his situation and did what they could, including making sure he took his medication. Still, he was in jail. Jail is not a substitute for treatment and, even if it does not

make the situation worse — which it often does — jailing our mentally ill, at best, only postpones their getting the help they need. It is, in fact, thoroughly counter-productive. Proper treatment will help insure that the individual will not return to the system. Jail tends to help insure that they will return.

The silver lining of this ordeal was that we finally received a thorough, detailed report from a well-respected forensic psychiatrist, which diagnosed his problems as stemming from his bi-polar and secondary mental conditions, which led him to self-mediate with other substances to feel better. The length of time it took to get this report, however, was totally unnecessary and a direct result of this state's unwillingness to place a priority on mental health treatment, and to create resources for those caught up in the criminal justice system. To our state legislators, I say with all due respect: We can do better. We must do better.

Once we had the report, however, another system took its turn in letting us down, this time, our insurance. Because Aaron had been incarcerated for so long, he did not meet certain criteria as being in "crisis" or an "immediate" threat to himself. Never mind the condition that the psychiatrist's report laid out in excruciating detail, it was extremely difficult to find a treatment facility that was able, or willing, to carefully thread the needle crafted by our health insurance. While we recognize that all have a job to do and a fiscal bottom line to protect, it should not be this difficult.

Fortunately, we were able to find a facility out of state that was both able to address Aaron's needs and, so far anyway, will be covered at least partially by our insurance. Aaron at last will

have an opportunity for treatment of his Bipolar disorder, to receive the right medication, and learn the skills to handle his addiction issues. Once he finishes treatment, he has plans to attend college.

Going forward, there will one last hurdle he will have to overcome, and it is one that I fear will prove a cruel challenge. My son is a felon. Indeed, he now has multiple felonies on his record that, at first glance — and that is all you usually get — sound terrible. We pray that there will be some employers who will take the time to listen to the entire story, and realize that all the felonies stem from his bi-polar and addiction issues — issues for which he has received treatment and are now under control. Most, however, will likely not take the time. While there is a mechanism to remove a single felony after seven years, it does not take into consideration situations like my son's. Again, I ask our state legislators: Can't we do better than this? Shouldn't we do better than this? Or do you truly want to doom a young man to a life of low-paying jobs, and perhaps public assistance, because of actions they took before they received a proper diagnosis and treatment?

Everyone who has encountered Aaron as he has wound his way through the system has commented that he is bright, engaging, and capable of great things. Many have remarked that he does not belong in their system. We agree. We are extremely grateful to those who understood what was going on, and tried to assist us. It is our sincere hope that Tennessee will join other states in recognizing that proper mental health treatment, particularly for those who find themselves in the criminal justice system, is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Michael and Laura Roden