



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

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Mary & Ross [REDACTED]

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Re: INQUIRY INTO YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN THE ACT

For over 9 years, my husband and I have been dealing with our son's drug and alcohol addiction coupled with mental health issues. These two topics go hand in hand.

Our son started into drugs between the ages of 16 & 17 years old, he is now 26. Starting out with smoking pot with his school friends, it escalated to other drugs, the worst of all, ice. Our son started on ice after leaving in his 3rd year of high school. One of his close friends gave him his first hit of the drug ice, and from there he was addicted. When we discovered money and possessions stolen, we knew he was in trouble. He was hiding out at the home of his friend's. The parents were fully aware of our son's drug use and supported him staying there knowing how frantic we were to help him. The first thing we did was go to the police. They explained they were unable to do anything. They did say they could do a welfare check, but could not forcefully remove him. For them to intervene, our son would have to be threatening harm to himself and/or others. We were struggling to understand why they did not take into account how scared for our son we were and worried. Why were they not able to help! This was the worst thing for us to hear as we placed so much hope in support from the police. As this nightmare progressed, we learned the police could not help the way we wanted them to because of the current legislation. When you are a parent and know your children, you want to help them because you know they are in trouble, what gives anybody the right to question anything when it comes to helping your kids?

We contacted ACT Mental Health. We asked them to help us. Our son was in trouble and needed some intervention. We asked if they would please have someone from their office come over and meet with our son. We wanted to nip this in the bud! They said they could not help him unless he asked them himself. He had to call them. He had an addiction! At that stage, it was making him feel fantastic. Why would he want to ask for help?

We have watched our son deteriorate. There were many episodes where he would smash the walls in our house in a rage, pull doors off the hinges. On one occasion, we hid my iPad in my bedroom and locked the door. He would go online and get in touch with dealers. (We placed locks on all of the doors to stop him from getting in and stealing our things for drugs) He broke down the door to get inside to get the iPad. Another time he had gone into an

absolute frenzy and ripped a security door off the hinges that was too heavy for a single man to lift.

We called the police so many times we have lost count. Ross saved police callout cards with all of the dates they attended. Always the same scenario. They could not help unless we were willing to place domestic violence charges and have him arrested and in jail. Our son is not a criminal. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time. He tried ice out of curiosity, just once, and now he is hooked.

In summary of what I have explained, when a parent cries for help for their child in the first instance, and it has to do with drugs, the parents should have the support of the police and mental health! However, the legislation does not allow us to get help for our children. You see someone in trouble, you see someone drowning, and you throw him or her a rope – a lifeline. You do not just let them drown because they can choose whether to grab the rope or not! You jump in to help them. This has been the worst torture for my husband and me. To watch your son slowly deteriorate under the insidious drug ice! In my opinion, anyone in society that supports a belief like this is evil! Parents have a right to help their children when they are in trouble! Whether they are 18 or 30! This is so cruel. My husband and our other two sons are not medical professionals. We are not doctors! Yet it is expected for us to either throw them in jail (where it is so easy to obtain drugs!) or just watch them deteriorate without helping.

On an occasion, last April, our son went to visit his cousin on the Victorian border. He was away from the undesirable crowd and safe. He stayed for more than a month. He completed his Learners drivers' licence! He was doing an online course in community service to get qualifications to work. It was great.....until he bought a bus ticket to come back to Canberra to work at a nearby festival. In a matter of a week, he backslid and started using ice again.

Our son tries to get better, then just is not strong enough and slips back. He will not accept help from any counselling service. The dealers know where he is and they continue to target him! I recently watch the movie called "Ben is Back" and it was so true, it was as if they took our stories out of our mouths. It is about a woman whose son has a drug addiction. He goes to rehab, and then comes home. By the time, people know her son is back in town, the dealers that knew him target him. Perhaps schools could show movies like this to their students. I would suggest having people come in on a regular basis to talk to the students that have had firsthand experience, impressing upon the students the impact that drugs have had on family members, and friends. It needs to be powerful and have a real impact. We have to work on implementing change. It is not just going to go away! There needs to be a program in place purely to educate and protect our kids.

My husband and I applied for legal guardianship with the tribunal; they turned down our application because we did not have enough proof for them. They wanted medical proof. How do you do that when your son will not get help? The attitude is its just tough luck! The panel told us "we are sorry, that is just the way it is." Then they suggested that we stay on the merry-go-round. When our son falls (uses), put him back on the merry-go-round until he falls off again!

On one occasion, my son charged for trespassing after causing a disturbance at a public premise. He was heavily intoxicated and frightening the patrons. He had to appear in court.

Feeling a ray of hope, my husband and I wrote a letter to the magistrate pleading that they order our son get help, expressing clearly he needed help and why. The magistrate read the letter, put it down on the desk, and said she sentenced him to a good behaviour bond and he now has a criminal record as a result. The magistrate ignored my letter and we were again heartbroken at the lack of support. It felt like the world was against us.

In November 2019, my son had a series of episodes at home. With his first episode, I was so frightened. I did not know what he would do so I called my husband. He in turn called ACAT (Mental Health), and told them I was terrified and what my son was doing. It took a few hours but they did come and take him to hospital. This escalated to the worst possible in my mind. I was afraid he was permanently brain damaged! When they took our son, my husband and I both cried and held each other. We were relieved that at last our son was getting the help he needed. We were yet again disappointed. After 3 days in the mental health ward, we received a phone call from the doctors that our son was ready to come home! They gave him medication, diagnosed him, and counselled him on what to do next to get the help he needed. Then they called us and asked if we could pick him up, as he had nowhere else to go. We hoped they would keep him and give him rehabilitation, counselling, and professional guidance. It was as if they just slapped a band-aid on the wound and sent him home. We picked him up and happy he was in a good space. He expressed he wanted to get better.

He went back down the same road. Two more times we had to call mental health and the police, to pick him up and take him to hospital. The second time he was talking suicide, very scattered. They took him to the hospital emergency. He was as they say, "off his head", making no sense and lost in his mind. To my surprise, they allowed him to sign himself out of the emergency ward while he was waiting for a bed in the mental health ward. They expressed that they could not hold him when he was stable. He showed up at our home that evening, we were not aware yet that the hospital released him! Ross came home after dropping me to a meeting. The lights were on, and there was our son. Standing in the doorway very angry and asking, "What are you doing here?" Ross was scared, as he did not know what our son was capable of doing in his state of anger. Our son ended up going to a hotel down the road. He hugged Ross and told him he loved him as he left. I was at a meeting that evening. When it was finished and I saw Ross, he looked like a ghost. He explained how traumatised he was! He was so traumatised he called our eldest son to come over. Ross was not game to come inside on his own.

The third time we put our son in hospital, we rang mental health, and the police. He was taken in again to the emergency ward. This time they let him out the next day and he showed up at my workplace in the foyer. He phoned me and I was in shock! He was let out again!! I rang Ross and we told our son we would take him to the doctor to talk about the medications he received from the hospital, and he would help. He was agreeable to this, which was good. The doctor checked his medications and had a long discussion with our son. Things were so up and down. We needed to do something! We needed to get him out of Canberra!

We were in touch with a woman that wanted to help and introduced us to her friend who had worked in rehabs before. He had met our son and offered him some work at his home he was renovating in Tasmania. He stayed there for about 8 weeks. My sister and I went to spend time in Tasmania visiting him. He bought himself a ticket to come home with us on the boat.

We tried to convince him to stay and continue getting help, but he bought his ticket and he was coming home.

Since he has been back he has been more settled, but announced he is still using ice and does not intend on stopping. He was taking his medication for a while but has now stopped. We contacted ACAT since he has been back. They have closed his case because he went to Tasmania. They said if things get bad again to give him a call. To me this is not satisfactory.

This system is a band-aid approach. It is a merry-go-round system. There is no help offered unless he goes and asks for help. He has mental health issues too. As I say, mental health and drug addiction go hand in hand. Things have to escalate so bad before anyone will step in and help. The worst-case scenario has to happen before anyone will step in and force rehab! Rehab is a lifeline. It saves lives! Yes, the person has to be receptive. Sometimes it takes someone to take his or her hand and say, "let me help you." "Let's go." My son, as it is with so many others, cannot do this on his own. He has no clean friends that I know of. His best friend right now is an ice addict. It has to be someone other than family. Family are too close to the heart. Yes, my husband and I have given love and support, and we are always there. However, we do not have the medical training to deal with the mental illness. We are not psychiatrists or doctors. Believe me when I say this has taken its toll on us. I have been working so hard on my own self-care, but it has been so hard. Living on edge for the past 9 years has taken its toll. We are speaking out in this one case. We have met many others who are in a much worse place than Ross and I! You would be horrified if you heard some of these stories. When you receive submissions from others, I believe you will definitely see a familiar pattern.

Kind regards,

Mary and Ross [REDACTED]