

**Testimony of  
Debbie F. Plotnick, MSS, MLSP, Director of Advocacy  
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania  
to the  
Pennsylvania House Labor Relations Committee  
on the  
Healthy Families, Healthy Workplace Act (House Bill 1155)  
August 28, 2008**

Good Morning. My name is Debbie Plotnick and I'm the Director of Advocacy at the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania. In my professional role I am often called upon to speak about the needs of people who have mental illnesses and about the experiences of families affected by mental illness.

Thank you for inviting me to speak about House Bill 1155. This is a vitally needed piece of legislation. I'd like to begin my remarks by commending the authors of the Healthy Families, Healthy Workplace Act for its inclusiveness of the many types of familial relationships and its sensitivity to issues that heretofore have been, if not unrecognized, all too often unspoken—like mental illness and domestic violence. While everyone can relate to the need for paid sick days to take care of ourselves when we are felled by the flu or a nasty stomach virus, or to stay home with a sick child, there are also many, many Pennsylvanians who regularly need to take the day off to attend to their own mental health needs or those of their children.

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that, in a given year, one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder<sup>1</sup>. I know from my training and years of working in the mental health field that the vast majority of people with mental

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): The Numbers Count, Mental Disorders in America. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america.shtml>

health disorders want to work, and many do successfully work. Employment is a major component of recovery from even the most serious mental illness.

Even if we're not aware of it, we all have coworkers and colleagues who periodically see a psychiatrist to have their medication adjusted, or to manage an episodic mental health crisis, or to prevent an acute episode of mental illness. According to a report by the Surgeon General, about 20 percent of children have some sort of mental disorder, with 7% to 9% having a serious mental disturbance<sup>2</sup>, which means there are a lot of parents who need time off too. Parents play a vital role in getting a child with a mental illness well, as I know from personal experience.

My now grown daughter, Ashley, is an amazingly resilient and successful 26-year-old registered nurse with a college degree. She also happens to have a major mental illness: bipolar disorder. And for four harrowing years, from the time she was 14 until she was 18, more times than I care to remember or count, my daughter came close to dying. There were long and short emergency room visits, and close and far-away hospital stays. It took a lot of time, attention, and support to help her get her illness under control.

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Every day my professional life is informed by the knowledge of just how fortunate my husband and I were to have had health insurance that covered just about all of the medical care costs and some of the mental health care costs, and lots of credit to pay for the rest of the monetary costs associated with our daughter's suicide attempts. And we were especially lucky to be able to manage our professional schedules to support and attend to our daughter. There were many emergency room situations, hospitalizations with afternoon-only visiting hours, daytime family sessions and discharge meetings, and

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<sup>2</sup> Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, Chapter 2:  
[http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter2/sec2\\_1.html](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter2/sec2_1.html)

hard-to-get outpatient appointments. Many Pennsylvania parents don't have the luxury of flexible schedules, let alone paid days off, to attend to the needs of a hospitalized child, or one with ongoing medical or mental health needs.

In the Philadelphia region, where the shortage of child and adolescent mental health practitioners is a bit less severe than in rural parts of the state, even in a crisis situation there is still an average wait of three weeks<sup>3</sup> to obtain an appointment. Passage of this legislation would ease the financial pressure faced by parents who can't afford to lose a day's pay, or their job, but who also can't afford to pass up even a middle-of-the-workday opportunity to have their child seen by a mental health professional.

Passage of the Healthy Families, Healthy Workplace Act will definitely facilitate healthier individuals, families, workplaces, and greater employee and employer satisfaction. It will also go a long way toward easing some of the job-related worries that add another burden to the complexities of attending to a mental health need. Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mental Health System for Low-Income Children: The Philadelphia Story. PCCY, 2003  
<http://74.125.95.104/search?q=cache:j-2hGu9dSm0J:www.pccy.org/PDF/MentalHealthReportV1-LowPDF.pdf+average+wait+for+mental+appointment+for+children+in+philadelphia&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us>