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To those who want to improve mental health services in Colorado:

I am writing in support of SB19-222: Improving Access to Behavioral Health Services for Individuals At-risk of Institutionalization. I have a daughter with mental health issues who has been able to avoid institutionalization partly because I have had the financial resources and advocacy skills to help her get a great deal of therapy and support to navigate the system. She and her husband do not have high-paying jobs and her mental health issues caused her to lose her job, leading to even more stress and anxiety. Her husband and I were able to function as her safety net, to find additional resources before her illness led to self-harm or incarceration. Were her problems even a little more severe, we might not be sufficient to keep her from needing to be institutionalized. If that should happen, her odds of getting adequate care in this state are unlikely.

I worry terribly for those who do not have a safety net and no one to advocate for them. I am currently participating in a 12-week class sponsored by NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) for those who have a loved one or friend suffering from mental illness. The 24 participants in the class represent heart-wrenching sadness and frustration. These people have been trying with all their might to understand their loved one's illness and to keep them safe. There are tales of jail, suicide attempts, multiple therapists with conflicting diagnoses and medications, and a criminal justice system that seems woefully unprepared to handle mental illness, much less severe mental illness. Each week we tentatively greet each other in class with hopes that all our loved ones are still alive. The stories of frustration with the system are almost beyond belief. And, bear in mind that these people are family members who really care and have tried desperately to work with professionals and the penal system. Even with all of their advocacy, the system is failing them. In some cases, beds were available in the state but their loved one could not qualify because they did not live in the right county and, therefore, ended up in jail. Surely we can do better. If things work this poorly for those who are spending huge sums of their personal resources on therapists, and their Herculean efforts of time and energy are not enough to keep their loved one safe, just think about all of those who have no one in their corner.

It seems to me that it is our responsibility as citizens and legislators to provide better care for those with severe mental illness so they can avoid becoming involved in the criminal justice system. SB19-222 is a good step in that direction so I respectfully ask for your support for this bill.