

Presentation from Kimberly Blake MD

I became interested in advocacy for criminal justice reform after my son Sean died 38 days after release from the St. Jay Workcamp. Sean was incarcerated for a year for 5 nonviolent misdemeanor charges. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and substance use disorder, however he never received any of his psychiatric medications while in jail. He never saw a Psychiatrist despite being sent to Valley Vista specifically for a psychiatric evaluation. He had failed mental health court after a single relapse. Despite requests from our family (who had brought two of the charges, violating a no trespass order) to dismiss charges they were not dismissed. Another family friend requested dismissal of the charge for attempting to cash a bad check, again this was not dismissed.

After our experience, I went to work advocating for medication assisted treatment, as well as continuation of psychiatric medications while in jail. I started work as an Addiction Medicine Provider (my primary field is OBGYN) at Safe Recovery, offering treatment to people at the local syringe exchange. I am still close with many in the field of mental health, substance use, and incarceration.

I am the Vermont ambassador for Team Sharing, a group of parents who have lost children, to substance use or who suffered from substance use. Unfortunately, many of our children died after release or while in custody.

I have been involved in the Purdue Pharma bankruptcy trial, given testimony as a victim to the Sackler family. I have worked hard to get these funds for Vermont.

My concern is that while our state should receive settlement funds from this trial, I don't want the funds to be wasted on yet another brochure or website. I would hope these funds could go towards turning our jails into true rehabilitation programs.

I am attaching a video of my son asking for treatment, from jail, just months before he died. I see patients released from jail who receive minimal mental health treatment, they often have no plan on release for treatment or continuation of their medication for substance use. While at Safe Recovery, I personally paid for many people's medication as they had not even had their Medicaid turned on after release from jail. **This has not changed.**

Our prisons are just warehousing people with no mental health or substance use. **Even at Riker's Island, arguable one of the worst jails in the country people are given a substance use and mental health assessment and can receive psychiatric care within 48 hours of admission.**

We have made some progress, there is so much more to do. Let us make our carceral system the model for the US. A system where people are given a chance to have treatment and rehabilitation. As Sean often said, **"there are people who want to just lock us up and then there are folks who see us as humans who have made a mistake"**