



MOMSTELL

... because no family should face the disease of addiction alone

P.O. BOX 450
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055
717-384-6066
sharon@momstell.org
www.momstell.org

House Judiciary Committee
Public Hearing on Law Enforcement Response to the Heroin Epidemic

Testimony

Sharon L. LeGore

President MOMSTELL . Inc

Good Morning Chairman Marsico, Chairman Caltagirone, and Members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

As a parent, grandparent and family advocate, I have experience the very worst scenarios of addiction. My daughter struggled with addiction for 4 and half years. Her drug use progressed from marijuana to huffing, to LSD, cocaine and prescription pills, to what would be my daughter final drug of choice, heroin.

This drug turned sweet baby girl, with the beautiful smile, carefree spirit and gentle heart into someone I could not recognize. Angela went from an all American young girl who loved school, played the viola in the school band, had a ton of friends and was well liked to a drop out, untrustworthy liar and thief who not only stole to supply her habit but did whatever she had to do to obtain her drug. My daughter begged, shoplifted, stole a truck, and eventually even prostituted herself for the drug.

As her mother, I tried everything I knew to stop her. I attended tough love groups, searched for support and ways I could help her, but at the time, I could not find any help. We had Angela in eleven different facilities seeking treatment. I was uneducated about addiction and did not know that a few days here or a few days there of treatment was not long enough for her or anyone else to recover, but I trusted the Dr.'s when they said she is well, take her home. I dealt with Children and

Youth, with suicide attempts, hospitals, angry parents, self doubt, guilt, shelters, runaway attempts, fear, uncertainty, helplessness and at times hopelessness. I dealt with law enforcement, judges, lawyers, caseworkers and juvenile detention centers. I dealt with our local police station so much, that they didn't need to ask who was on the other end of the line because they recognized my voice and they kept an eight by ten glossy of Angela picture ready to identify her if she was brought in. Some police officers recommended I just let her go when she ran away since they would bring her back only to have her run again to pursue her addiction. How do you just let your child go? I encountered compassion from some and what seemed like contempt from others who felt, like many that it is was all somehow our fault as her parents. I desperately tried to understand why this drug had such deep seeded control over her. When I asked her, she explained to me that she needed heroin like she needed air to breathe.

On one occasion when Angela was arrested, I talked to her court appointed attorney and found out the name of the judge she would have to appear before. I decided to write him a letter asking for his help. In it I begged him to teach my daughter the lesson that you have to be accountable for your actions and this lesson needed to be taught before she turned 18 and found out the hard way what the adult justice system was like. I knew that the as a juvenile, the system would be more forgiving than when she became an adult. I explained to the judge the history of my daughter's addictions and her circumstances. When they called me to come to the courthouse for her hearing, I waited anxiously in a small room where I was told they would bring my baby girl into see me. My mind raced with thought of "How did we ever get to this place?" The door opened and I wanted desperately to look into her eyes, hold her and tell her how much I loved her, but my daughter walked through the door and to my disbelief was dressed in an orange suit, with a big leather belt around her waist, her hands cuffed, and chains from the belt that led down to the leather straps which connected to the leg irons surrounding her ankles. My heart literally sank as I realized my little girl had gone from recitals and ballet slippers to handcuffs and leg irons, in what seemed to me as overnight. Although she could not hold me back, I did hug her and I repeated the I love you's that I had gently whispered in the moments of that hug. We stood before the judge, but unfortunately he did not take my requests into account and gave her what I considered a get out of jail

free card to start her life over. No forced treatment for her addictions? No accountability for her actions? What could I do to save her? My hands were tied. She ran again and it was not long before on a cold dreary February morning that we received the call from the coroner that my daughter's body had been found, dumped by a muddy creek. She was dead from a heroin overdose.

Due to the circumstances of her death and the subsequent arrest of her drug dealer, I found myself enthralled with law enforcement once again and this time with the District Attorney's office. I was connected with the Victims Assistance Unit where I was treated with respect, something I had not been given much of by others. I also was introduced to a young assistant district attorney who showed compassion on me and made sure I received the information I needed to confirm that it was truly Angela they had found. So I could stop looking for her at every turn thinking this was all a huge mistake. Due to the extensive autopsy, I never got to see her body to know the young woman at the morgue was really my baby girl. The case against the drug dealer moved forward and unfortunately, he was given a very short sentence for the seven drug charges, involuntary manslaughter charges for leaving her on his floor without help for some 25-27 hours until she died. He was also charged with abuse of a corpse for dragging her body down that muddy embankment and leaving her thrown against a tree.

His sentence of 1-2 years minus a day came as a complete shock since he could have received over 14 years, but he was out in just shy of 11 months for good behavior. I was stunned at the verdict and even more stunned when I received the letter that he was being released from jail so early. He has been arrested since on drug charges and last I heard about him in the news was an arrest for growing weed in his home. I share our story with you because as a result of that lenient sentence, the direction of my own life changed. I began trying to figure out what I could do to change the laws and found out that a heroin drug trafficking bill had been introduced by Representative Marsico. I called his office and set up a meeting and told him my story and asked what I could do to help.

I began working on this legislation to see that it passed and the heroin drug trafficking law was passed into law. At that time I thought my work was done and I

accomplished what I set out to do but in the mean time, due to the publicity of the trial and work on the legislation, parents who were struggling with their child's addiction began to contact me and as a result MOMSTELL, was formed. We are a parent advocacy organization focused on substance abuse education, supporting families and uniting those impacted by substance abuse and to work towards improving programs practice and policy surrounding substance abuse.

A grand jury hearing was held about the heroin problem in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania, just three years after my daughter's death which was in 1998. Here I am 14 years later, again testifying before the House Judiciary committee and the severe prevalence of heroin is still the subject of discussion.

According to state law enforcement officials, Pennsylvania has the third highest number of heroin users, behind California and Illinois. The data shows heroin is the most commonly cited drug among primary drug treatment admissions in the state. 1 We know the numbers would be much higher for heroin admissions if treatment was readily available .

Throughout Pennsylvania families are struggling with a child's addiction just like I did and still deal with today. Their addiction sometimes forces them into homelessness, jails and institutions. It robs them of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-worth and the trust of their family. In 2001 the Grand Jury had a few observations and recommendations and the one I would like to reiterate today is that law enforcement, schools, and charitable organizations should improve their drug education programs to emphasize the rise of heroin use and its addictive and destructive effect on the lives of the users. They must be taught that based on evidence, snorting, smoking and injecting heroin are equally dangerous. We must teach them that heroin users often turn to a life of crime to support their addiction and that they face a real possibility of overdose death. As a mother, I know that reality is true, it was true in 1998, it was true in 2001 when this report came out from the grand Jury and it is true today.

As family members and advocates, we do recognize the problems that continue to exist today. We need to cut down the demand on heroin and other drugs. We at

MOMSTELL would like to offer some suggestions as a way to combat this heroin epidemic.

1) Continue with prevention education efforts to teach our children, parents and communities about the dangers of addiction, and the effects it has on the brain, and put an emphasis on prescription drug opiod's and heroin. Let's bring this discussion out of the background and into the foreground of discussions

2) Support substance abuse cross training for law enforcement, first responders and community leaders as well . We realize that law enforcement needs the communities support and we need to know some tangible ways we can help as a community. Allowing parents and family members the chance to tell what life is like from their perspective, sharing this knowledge and learning the challenges of law enforcement would be a good start.

3.) Support the passage of HB 1694, the prescription drug monitoring legislation. This will begin to put a dent in the Dr. shopping that is plaguing our state.

4) We suggest the formation of a collaborative partnership between family leadership, law enforcement and policy makers to discuss the epidemic level drug problem and to tackle the issues collaboratively.

5) Increase the level of drug courts around the state.

As I mentioned, I began this nightmare journey when my daughter was 14 and a half, she would have been 34 now. I am still dealing with the disease of addiction with other family members so to say it devastates families is truly a fact not only for me, but millions of families across this country. I receive calls and emails weekly from parents who just found out their child is using heroin, those struggling to get their child into treatment, but having difficulties due to funding and available options, and there are always the calls I dread from parents who just lost her child to a heroin overdose. I received one of those calls just yesterday.

It is critical that prevention, treatment, recovery, law enforcement, policy makers and the legislature working together collaboratively to address this issue. Families are struggling to save their children's lives, law enforcement is struggling with ways to curb this epidemic, and you, our legislators, are relying on us to help you with ideas that can be translated into bills that will make a real difference in this effort to cut back the demand and devastation heroin has brought to the Commonwealth.. We need to focus on areas where we can make a difference here, funding for treatment, recovery and prevention, support for law enforcement and support for family organizations who are taking that leadership role to help families around the state.

This is a deadly disease that has killed thousands of Pennsylvanians, impacted countless families and left many parents and family members struggling to cope with the loss of a child, sibling or loved one. As a state, we must face this epidemic head on but more importantly we must face it working together.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.