

Laura's Law -- Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT)

(Gibbs. Updated 1/13/2022)

In 2018, the California Health Care Foundation reported that two-thirds of adults with a mental illness in California did not get treatment. Continuing psychotic breaks lead to a process of mental deterioration too often resulting in grave disability¹, and the risk of death.

For persons with the most serious illness, California has adopted a successful outpatient treatment program known as Laura's Law. A 2020 California Auditors' report recommended that Laura's Law be adopted statewide in order to reduce the need for involuntary treatment.

Called Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) nationally, Laura's Law is a civil legal process that mandates county behavioral health departments provide intensive outpatient treatment to persons unable or unwilling to seek out or accept treatment themselves, often due to the brain condition, anosognosia². The criteria for treatment are based on history. Given an individual's history, we know what's likely to happen next if we don't intervene: hospitalization, arrests, threats or acts of violence. AOT is a community-based early intervention tool for individuals in deteriorating condition.

Persons eligible for Laura's Law must be so ill they are not likely to survive safely in the community without it. Often, but not always, these persons are homeless and at risk on our streets. Once someone is stabilized, he/she is able to recognize the need for treatment and continue it. Effective Jan. 2022, AOT is authorized as a step-down from mental health conservatorship.

Nationally, over a period of almost 20 years, Assisted Outpatient Treatment has been shown to significantly reduce incarcerations, involuntary hospitalizations, ER utilization, and homelessness. AOT has been designated by the federal SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency) Gains Center as a successful intervention to prevent the criminalization of persons with serious mental illness.

A Successful Program in California

- In 2014, LA County fully adopted Laura's Law, following the success of a forensic pilot program that reduced hospitalizations by 86%, and incarcerations by 78%.
- In 2017, in San Francisco County, 87% of AOT participants had reduced or avoided psychiatric emergency services, 65% had reduced or avoided time spent in inpatient psychiatric hospitalization, and 74% had reduced or avoided time spent incarcerated.
- In Orange County, homelessness of AOT participants has been reduced by 74%. When persons with serious mental illness receive adequate treatment, they become more capable of maintaining stable housing, while a number are able to return to their family homes.
- In Contra Costa County, cost savings (for reduced incarcerations and inpatient commitments for 75 persons in its' program for 29 months) were shown to be almost 3 million dollars (\$2,842,710).
- In Santa Barbara County, the assertive outreach phase of Laura's Law brought more than 50% of its clients into voluntary treatment during its pilot program.

Who Qualifies? Someone must:

- Be eighteen years of age or older
- Be suffering from a mental illness
- Be unlikely to survive safely in the community without supervision, based on a clinical determination
- Have a history of non-compliance with treatment. that has either been a significant factor in his or her being in a hospital, prison or jail at least twice within the last thirty-six months; or resulted in one or more acts, attempts or threats of serious violent behavior toward self or others within the last forty-eight months
- Have been offered an opportunity to voluntarily participate in a treatment plan by the local mental health department but continue to fail to engage in treatment
- Be in need of assisted outpatient treatment in order to prevent a relapse or deterioration that would likely result in the person meeting California's inpatient commitment standard
- Be likely to benefit from assisted outpatient treatment; and
- Participation in the assisted outpatient program is the least restrictive placement necessary to ensure the person's recovery and stability.

Who Can Refer?

- Immediate adult family members;
- Person 18 years of age or older residing with the individual;
- Director of treating agency, charitable organization, licensed residential care facility or hospital;
- Treating licensed mental health professional;
- Peace officer, parole or probation officer supervising the individual.
- A judge (added July 2021)

For more information, contact Lynne Gibbs, NAMI Santa Barbara County at gibbslyn2@gmail.com. To apply, call the Dept. of Behavioral Wellness access line, 888-868-1649. (Do not be dissuaded by the waitlist. The county is expanding capacity).

¹ In California, **Grave Disability** is defined as a condition in which a person is unable to provide for his or her basic personal needs for food, clothing, or shelter.

² **Anosognosia**, also called "lack of insight," is a symptom of severe, untreated mental illness experienced by 50% of persons with schizophrenia that impairs the ability to understand one is ill -- the same mental impairment associated with dementia. It is the single biggest reason why people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder refuse or do not seek treatment for their mental disorders.