

How to Help a Mentally Ill Family Member Who Has Been Arrested

Source: <http://www.schizophrenia.com>

This is, tragically, not that uncommon a concern for families of schizophrenia patients. It's important to know that people with schizophrenia are not more violent than the average person - *as long as they are receiving adequate treatment*. However, it is increasingly difficult for people with schizophrenia to get and stay in treatment, and this is perhaps why about 1 in 6 inmates have some sort of mental illness.

Once someone has been arrested, they are in the domain of the legal system, which can be just as if not more confusing than the medical system. Right now there is not very good coordination between these two systems to help offenders with brain disease. However, there are some things that you can do, and some resources you can tap.

The following suggestions have been adapted for general use from NAMI publications by the chapters of California and Wisconsin. Depending on your state regulations, these may or may not work for you. Look up your local Protection and Advocacy Agency (<http://www.napas.org/>), which offers services for mentally ill citizens, and ask for legal advice pertaining to your area.:

1) Offer your support. Help your loved one stay calm, and remind him/her of legal rights (right to an attorney, etc).

2) Contact the local jail where your relative is being held. Let the official in charge know that your relative has a psychiatric disorder, and give information about the specific diagnosis and symptoms. Ask how long your loved one is expected to be held, and ask the jail staff about arranging a psychiatric evaluation. If he/she is seriously ill, you can ask for a police transport to a psychiatric hospital (this is called a "5150" hold) for three days of evaluation and treatment. Ask about the possibility of receiving medication at the holding facility (it seems like medication is generally available only at County jails, not city ones).

3) Notify your loved one's psychiatrist, case manager, and the jail medical staff or administrator of the situation, and stress the importance of continuing uninterrupted medical care.

3) If and when your relative is transferred to a county jail facility, contact them and ask for their location and booking number. Ask if you can fax over information regarding your relative's medical diagnosis, and ask about placement in a mental health unit (if available).

Information about your relative to provide to the jail facility staff:

- Diagnosis
- Psychiatrist's name/phone/address
- Medical doctor's name/phone/address

Disclaimer: Schizophrenia.com provides information about schizophrenia and other psychiatric disease issues to interested parties. This information is not a guide for patient treatment, nor is it meant to provide a substitute for professional advice about medical treatment of the disorder by a licensed physician or clinician. No medical advice is given, nor is any provided on or distributed from this website. No medical advice is provided from information distributed from this website. Users interested in medical advice or treatment must consult a licensed practitioner. No doctor-patient relationship is created through the use of this web site, or any information distributed from this website.

©Copyright 1996-2005. Schizophrenia.com. All Rights Reserved

- Medications with dosages and times to be administered
- Side effects that your loved one experiences
- History of suicide threats/attempts
- Other medical conditions and medications prescribed for them

Providing this information can help the staff in conducting their own assessment before placing your loved one in a mental health unit. Keep the information in the fax medical-related only, and keep a copy for future reference.

4) Find out if there are any Mental Health Courts in your area - these are special courts that assist mentally ill offenders. Sometimes these courts make decisions to release an offender (after a certain portion of the sentence is served) on the condition that the person remain in an approved treatment program.

5) Decide about legal representation. If you do not have a private attorney, your loved one will be assigned a public defender. Don't automatically assume that the public defender will do a less credible job than a private one; do some research and find out about all options. A local support group such as a NAMI chapter might be a good resource for this, if other families have had experience in the local legal system. Also, see the American Bar Association's (<http://www.abanet.org/disability/lawpract1.html>)

6) Resources you can contact for assistance:

- The National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems (<http://www.napas.org>)
- The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Laws - <http://www.bazelon.org/> (202-467-5730)
- The Treatment Advocacy Center – <http://www.psychlaws.org> (703-294-6001).
- The Consensus Project - a national effort to improve the services to people with mental illness in the criminal justice system (<http://consensusproject.org/>)

An excellent book on this subject is Northumberland Nightmare (author Paul L. Wegkamp), written by a father whose mentally ill son was charged and incarcerated for robbing a bank. He writes about difficult encounters with both the legal and medical system in the struggle to get fair and decent treatment for his son

Disclaimer: Schizophrenia.com provides information about schizophrenia and other psychiatric disease issues to interested parties. This information is not a guide for patient treatment, nor is it meant to provide a substitute for professional advice about medical treatment of the disorder by a licensed physician or clinician. No medical advice is given, nor is any provided on or distributed from this website. No medical advice is provided from information distributed from this website. Users interested in medical advice or treatment must consult a licensed practitioner. No doctor-patient relationship is created through the use of this web site, or any information distributed from this website.

©Copyright 1996-2005. Schizophrenia.com. All Rights Reserved