

One Year Later

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Photo by Amanda Leung

Last March, I wrote about our family’s decision to buy a house for my homeless and mentally ill younger sister. Over the past year, our experiences with her, and with the social service and criminal justice systems, have continued to be eye-opening.

To my surprise, overall the project has been a success. My sister, who lives in a small town in central Oregon, has been much more stable over the past year. I believe this is partly because having her basic needs – housing, food, medical care – taken care of decreases her anxiety level and her tendency to lash out in destructive ways.

One of the lessons of working with her over the past year is that nothing short of complete support is effective. Her prospects for working are limited by both a lack of ability to focus and by her extensive criminal record, compiled over the past 30 years.

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She cannot pass an employment background check, and central Oregon has no programs like the Bay Area’s Rubicon Industries, which would factor her illness into sponsoring her and managing her in the workplace.

So we not only purchased a house within walking distance of the stores and services she needs, but we gathered furniture and household items, took them to Oregon, and set up a household for her. We pay her utilities and provide a bicycle or arrange van service for her transportation.

We provide no cash to our sister. Any cash she obtains seems to be spent on alcohol or given away before it can be used for food, bills or other necessities. We arrange weekly vouchers for her at the grocery store, which may not be used to purchase alcohol. Payments to the beauty salon and handyman are made directly to them. She probably sometimes trades her food coupons to others for alcohol, but at least most of the funds go for food. We provide her with phone cards for long-distance service; otherwise she racks up huge bills.

With this system in place, our sister has been living rather happily for the past year, with her cat, Cupcake, and her dog, Amber. People she met in jail or at the motel where she previously stayed have tried to move in with her, but with our encouragement about

maintaining her private space, she has told them to move on.

One of our first challenges was to seek medical insurance for our sister. After repeated denials, we not only acquired coverage, but obtained reimbursement for most of the premiums from the state of Oregon, under a program for low-income residents. So she has been taking needed medications.

Our sister still gets drunk periodically, but a fraction as much as she did prior to moving into her house. Now her binges last for a few days, but she is sober most of the time.

A year ago, I predicted that because the court system in Oregon’s Crook County was routing her through the criminal system rather than to mental health services, she would end up returning to jail. True to form, she was back in jail for several days in December.

Even though she is unable to earn a living, as a criminal under Oregon’s laws she is responsible for paying fees for both her probation and court-ordered social services. She had skipped some of the alcoholism classes mandated by the court, had no funds to pay her \$385 bill for the classes, and otherwise ran afoul of her monitors, though no one will tell us what exactly happened to land her back in jail.

We recently learned that she has been ordered by the court to receive mental health services, including Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which addresses her personality disorder. We have been asking the court in Crook County for more than 20 years to provide her with appropriate mental health services. We are grateful that someone there finally gets the picture of mental illness.

The most difficult challenge over the past year has been the lack of communication between the social services agency responsible for her oversight, and our family. They say they are not able to talk with us due to privacy concerns. Since our sister is not always a realistic communicator, situations arise like her unpaid bills or other behavior, whereupon she goes back to jail without anyone telling us what is going on. Once we understood the situation, we paid her overdue bills and are taking care of her ongoing fees, but that was too late to prevent her most recent incarceration.

Concerns for privacy, as essential as they are, sometimes get in the way of effective coordination of care for those who are mentally ill. This is a widespread problem, which needs to be addressed by the legal and mental health systems. Ω