

# 4 new mental health laws are only a start for the AZ 'Mad Moms,' who have big plans

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The Arizona Mad Moms can take credit for four new mental health laws, but members of the growing group say it's only a start in reforming what they say is a severely broken state system that has left their children needlessly unhoused, incarcerated and, in some cases, dead.

New state laws the group supported and pushed through the legislative process are about accountability within the system — ensuring that people with serious mental illness get better treatment from providers by ensuring that providers listen to families and consider a patient's history.

One of the top accomplishments was requiring the state's Medicaid agency and health insurers to track the outcomes of people with serious mental illness who show up at psychiatric crisis centers and those who are involuntarily hospitalized.

Bigger proposed reforms of Arizona's behavioral health system ahead, group organizer and leader Rachel Streiff said.

"We're not going to let our kids get neglected by the system anymore," Streiff said to a packed room of more than three dozen Mad Moms members and supporters who gathered at the Arizona Capitol on June 26 to celebrate their legislative wins. "We've got to get help for our community."

Serious mental illness, often referred to as SMI, affects about 5% of the population. That works out to approximately 17 million Americans and an estimated 383,000 Arizonans, though only a fraction of Arizonans are getting help for their illness, Mad Moms' research shows.

"Psychiatric disabilities are treated with significant discrimination by the system," said Streiff, who is the guardian of an Arizona woman with serious mental illness.

Mad Moms got the attention of lawmakers this past session through weekly Mental Illness Monday stories of Arizonans with serious mental illness told by Sen. Catherine Miranda, D-Phoenix, who sits on the state Legislature's Psychiatric Hospital Review Council.

The Mental Illness Monday stories included narratives of young Arizonans with big dreams whose goals were upended by what their families say was inadequate treatment for schizophrenia and related problems — a sound technician intern in Hollywood, a competitive soccer player who graduated with honors from Arizona State University; an aspiring brain surgeon; and an aircraft mechanic with a full-time job. One died by suicide, and the others have struggled to stay well.

Schizophrenia [affects about 1% of the population](#), which in Arizona works out to roughly 73,000 people.

Midway through the session, the Mad Moms set up a "Sad Shoes" display on the House of Representatives lawn at the state Capitol to represent loved ones who they say were victims of the state's behavioral health system — they've gone missing, are incarcerated, are living on the streets or dead after poor treatment, a lack of a discharge plan and improper resources, among other shortcomings, according to those who participated.

In a nod to the requirements in psychiatric units to prevent self-harm, many of the shoes were missing their "contraband" laces.

Wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with their group name, the Arizona Mad Moms were a noticeable and effective presence with "grass-roots authenticity" and bipartisan support at the Arizona Capitol this past legislative session, said Will Humble, executive director of the Arizona Public Health Association.

"They worked across the aisle. They found champions like Rep. Consuelo Hernandez (D-Tucson), Sen. Catherine Miranda (D-Phoenix) and Justine Wadsack (R-Tucson)," Humble said. "They are agnostic on party affiliation — what they care about is improving services for people with mental illnesses. ... They have a tenacity about them."

### **Arnold v. Sarn settlement to get renewed scrutiny**

Among the Mad Moms' upcoming planned reforms is addressing what Streiff and other group leaders have identified as deficiencies in the landmark [Arnold v. Sarn](#) court case.

Arnold vs. Sarn was a 1981 class-action lawsuit that secured a better support system for Arizonans with serious mental illness, though Streiff and others say the lawsuit's 2014 settlement with the state has serious shortcomings that need to be fixed.

Possibly the biggest of the deficiencies in the Arnold vs. Sarn settlement is the lack of adequate and affordable housing for people with serious mental illness, Streiff and other group members say — a problem that the lawsuit's plaintiff, Chick Arnold, said he unsuccessfully fought to address in the case settlement.

"What was lacking, and is still lacking through the mental health system, is effective housing. You can't recover in the absence of having a safe and secure place to live," Arnold told The Arizona Republic in 2023. "That has never been addressed. ... It's impossible to get the benefits of a system in the absence of adequate housing. Shortsighted is the kindest way of describing it."

Other problems with the Arnold v. Sarn settlement include inadequate family support services and a lack of respite care to provide relief for family caregivers of loved ones with serious mental illness. Both were required as part of the settlement.

"Mothers have become the new asylums, with little assistance," Streiff said.

### **'John's Law' in honor of John Fox signed into law this year**

The four new laws the Mad Moms advocated for and were signed into law by Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs in the past legislative session were:

- "John's Law" — a law written in memory of John Fox, whose son Joshua Fox stabbed him to death in June 2021. [Joshua, who had schizophrenia, later died by suicide in prison](#). The law mandates health providers collect patient history during screening evaluations for involuntary psychiatric care, something that the Fox family says may have saved John Fox's life. Mental health advocates say too many families live in fear of loved ones who experience psychosis, and if evaluators were more careful, they would know that releasing certain patients like Joshua Fox to his family would put family members in danger.
- A law mandating an improved and more inclusive process for families of patients with serious mental illness who are in court-ordered treatment proceedings. The new law is going to require a work group to implement, and health care agencies already have begun reaching out about how to best implement it, Streiff said.
- Requiring outcomes data for people who get treatment for serious mental illness in Arizona, including those who are involuntarily hospitalized in psychiatric units. Readmissions, rates of incarceration and recidivism are all outcomes data. "We want to know if our system that we spend \$2 billion on a year on is working, not whether they are just delivering services," mental health attorney Josh Mozell said during testimony supporting the outcomes data in a Feb. 6 state Senate Health and Human Services Committee hearing. Streiff said the Arizona Association of Health Plans partnered with Mad Moms to finalize the bill.
- Tighter requirements that the state's Medicaid agency uphold state-required standards for ensuring patients with mental illness get the correct medication when they are discharged after hospitalization and for peer specialist oversight. "There's an epidemic of medication mistakes upon discharge. We're trying anything we can to prevent this," Streiff said. "It is expensive and devastating when it happens."

### **A 'carousel of failure': Mad Moms label the state behavioral health system**

[Mad Moms](#) began in an informal way in 2023, with a small group of parents, guardians and relatives of people with serious mental illness showing up to support families whose loved ones with mental illness were going through the criminal justice system. As of July 3, the mailing list was at nearly 300 people, interest in the group was constant, and chapters were forming in other states, Streiff said.

The Arizona group includes moms, dads, siblings, guardians and others, but most are mothers who often describe their children with serious mental illness as being caught in a "carousel of failure" – getting court-ordered treatment after a psychiatric crisis, getting hospitalized and released, only to have another crisis.

Those crises often include arrest. The criminalization of people with serious mental illness is a huge frustration for Mad Moms families, who say their loved ones need better health care to keep them stable and able to achieve goals like having a job, living on their own and having friends. Instead, they are getting arrested for problems frequently caused by psychosis that can range from being disruptive in public to violence, as Joshua Fox's case demonstrates, group members say.

Their frustrations are part of a longstanding national problem – numerous studies and [reports](#) have shown that people with mental illness are [overrepresented in the justice system](#).

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