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In 1990, my husband died rather suddenly, leaving me, at age 43 with a five year old daughter and a two year old son. Our Social Security Survivors' benefits were considered too much to qualify for Medicaid, which at the time was not available in Ohio to anyone over 33%FPL. The small nonprofit for which I work cannot afford full-time employees, so offering health benefits is simply not feasible. I tried buying a private policy, which seemed affordable at first. However, every April and every October, right along with the time change, the insurance company jacked up my premiums. And they didn't go up just a little – they went up a lot! Eventually I had to give it up. Seven years later, however, Congress created the SCHIP program, which Ohio dubbed Healthy Start. At first the eligibility cap was 150%FPL. This required me to turn down raises and refuse additional hours at my job in order to keep my children enrolled. The increase to 200%FPL helped, but we still went without other things in order to retain the medical coverage.

When my daughter was in the eighth grade, and at the top of her class in Canton City School's High Ability Program, her class was shown a "red flags" video on adolescent depression. Recognizing that she was experiencing many of those symptoms, she came to me and said she needed help and began seeing a therapist. Shortly after her 15th birthday, however, she began to hallucinate and to hear voices in her head - voices which urged her to harm herself and others. I missed two weeks of work while she was on a suicide watch. She went through a number of diagnoses, but the one that finally stuck was Bipolar Disorder with Psychotic Features. Her high school years were a blur of doctor's appointments to deal with the positive and negative symptoms of the disease as well as the side effects of the medications.

Luckily, I work for FACES of Stark County, Inc., a family advocacy organization established under the auspices of the Federal Children's Mental Health Initiative.

FACES works across systems, supplying peer advocates to support families experiencing any sort of problems. But with our roots in mental health, I already had a thorough education in children's mental health issues when my daughter's symptoms began. I truly believe that the Lord put me there to be the best possible advocate for my daughter when the time came. And were it not for FACES's family support philosophy and for being blessed with the very best boss on the planet, I probably would have lost my job.

The bottom line, however, is that without Healthy Start, which included complete coverage for mental health, I never would have been able to afford any of her treatment. Even a private policy, if I could have afforded one, would have imposed a cap which she would have maxed out in no time. I am told that early diagnosis and treatment are the key to controlling major mental illness and to a positive life-long prognosis, and I believe it. The green bracelet that I wear is in honor of my daughter and her courage – which humbles me. It says “Treatment Works – People Recover.” Today my daughter is 22, happily married with a beautiful daughter of her own, and has a good job as a restaurant manager, and has her own health insurance coverage.. When I asked her permission to tell her story publicly, she made just one request – she asked me to remind you that persons living with mental illness are perfectly capable of being good parents and raising healthy children of their own – but that treatment is the key. Without access to early mental health care, she might be locked up in a room somewhere talking to people who aren't there, and the taxpayers would be paying a lot more for that than they did for her treatment. The difference was Ohio's SCHIP program, Healthy Start.