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I am a sister, a mother, and a grandmother. I love books, movies, horses and my computer. I'm an optimist, an advocate and I'm a person with a mental illness. I was diagnosed with a mental illness in my mid 30s and I had private insurance. Several years ago I lost my job and with it my insurance. I fell into a deep depression and felt useless to the world. I wasn't taking my medication, I was getting shut-off notices, my phone had been turned off and I had about 3 days of food left. When that was gone I intended to kill myself. My daughter who lives in California became concerned when she couldn't reach me on the phone. She called around and found someone that would come check on me. They found I wasn't doing well and took me to Common Ground, the access point for community mental health services in Oakland County. From there I was hospitalized for 5 weeks, became stabilized back on my medications and then began receiving services from Easter Seals. I had no idea there was such a thing as community mental health and that I could get the help I needed. That's what our system does: It creates a safety net for people when they are at their most vulnerable. Our system saves lives. It not only saves them, but it helps us to find a life that is worth living and for that I thank you.

I am also grateful for the foresight that our governor and you are showing by forming this Commission and its Workgroups. I especially appreciate the hard work that you did over the summer in getting Medicaid Expansion passed. For the last several years I've been receiving disability and I have Medicaid with a high Spend Down. I work part-time and it costs me to work because it drives up the Spend Down. In fact, my Spend Down is actually 70% of my income. Could you pay 70% of your income in order to have healthcare. You could probably do it for a month, maybe even 2 or 3 months but you certainly couldn't afford a 70% deductible month after month after month. I have several physical health conditions and I have teeth that are crumbling in my mouth. Not being able to access my Medicaid keeps me in a state of anxiety which is certainly not good for my health, both my mental health and my physical health.

I also want to tell you about a close family member who does not have health insurance. She was diagnosed a number of years ago with MS. She does not have a primary doctor and has found herself in the position of using the emergency room for her healthcare. When having symptoms, she'd wait and wait until it felt like an emergency. She has been admitted several times for further test, expensive tests, because oftentimes her symptoms would mimic a heart attack, kidney issues or a stroke. (She had a head bleed over 4 years ago after falling face-first down a full flight of stairs.) In the last several months she's been diagnosed with a panic disorder, migraines, kidney issues and spasms around her heart from the MS. She's been to the emergency room 3 times and admitted twice just in this last month and a half. At the last visit, they finally x-rayed her neck and found she has cervical spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal canal which then impinges on her nerves which accounts for all of the symptoms that have lead to other diagnosis in conjunction with the MS. As a taxpayer, I am very cognizant of the fact that emergency room care is far more costly than the follow-up care a primary physician could provide. As a family member, I am very aware of the tremendous pain and suffering she has had to endure by not having healthcare.

With all of the impending changes I and many other people I know are quite anxious. I will make a promise to you as long as you can make one to me. I promise to manage my anxiety and to continue to manage my illnesses to the best of my ability. I promise to continue advocating for those who are unable to do so and I promise to continue giving back and being a positive force in my community. In return, would you promise to keep us individuals in mind as you go about your work, remember how much we are counting on you? And please be on guard for the unintended consequences of all the impending changes in our healthcare system. When looking at the rankings of the healthiest states, Michigan comes in at # 37. Also Michigan is one of the few states that do not have mental health parity. This leaves a lot of room for improvement. Let's make it a goal to move up at least 5 slots each year. With this Commission, we have a chance to do so.