

**Testimony by Julie McFarland on
Bill #5821, “An Act Concerning Behavioral Health And Substance Abuse Services
That Are Gender Specific And Trauma-Informed.”**

Honorable Members of the Committee:

I am Julie McFarland, a graduate student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I am here today to testify on Bill #5821, “An Act Concerning Behavioral Health And Substance Abuse Services That Are Gender Specific And Trauma-Informed.” I support this legislation and hope that you will as well.

Culture, media and family convey gender-specific messages from the beginning of a person’s life, resulting in males and females being socialized differently. It is essential that behavioral health and substance abuse treatment providers appropriately respond to these messages and deliver services that are comprehensive and holistic. Research shows that girls and boys respond to experiences differently. They have different pathways to problem behaviors and face different issues and challenges. Therefore, the mechanisms and models for responding to males’ and females’ needs must be different in order to be effective. Gender-specific services comprehensively address the needs of a gender group in ways that are responsive to those differences and foster positive gender identity development.

Specifically, when addressing domestic violence and sexual assault, it is essential that we provide services that are designed to meet the unique needs of females, that value the female perspective, that celebrate and honor the difference of female experience, that respect and take into account female development and that empower women to reach their full potential. Because these issues most often involve trauma, it is also essential for services to be trauma informed – that is, be informed about, and sensitive to, trauma-related issues present in survivors. In order for services to be helpful and supportive, providers *must* have an understanding of the role that trauma plays in the lives of people seeking mental health and addictions services. Without a clear understanding, we are taking the risk of causing inadvertent re-traumatization and inhibiting consumer participation in treatment.

To effectively identify and encourage best practices by all state and state-contracted service providers, funding is necessary in the form of a competitive grant program. We must provide assistance to providers as they implement the most effective evidence-based practices that are gender-specific and trauma informed.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I’d be happy to answer any questions.