Central Naugatuck Valley
HELP, Inc.
900 Watertown Avenue, Waterbury, CT 06708 Phone/Fax 203-756-8984

Testimony to the Public Health Committee

February 21, 2007

In Support of *House Bill #6088: An Act Concerning a Dedicated Alcohol Tax to Fund Substance Abuse Treatment Programs and House Bill #5631: An Act Concerning State Spending on Community Mental Health Services*

By Roberta Murtagh, Executive Director

Good Afternoon honored members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Roberta Murtagh and I am the Executive Director of Central Naugatuck Valley Help Inc., and a member of the CT Association of Nonprofits. At Help, Inc., we contract with the State of CT to provide addiction and mental health treatment to over 380 individuals and their families annually. The vast majority of whom have no private health insurance and are among the poorest citizens of our state.

I am here today to urge support of 2 bills, #6088 and #5631.

I support for Bill Number 6088, An Act Concerning a Dedicated Alcohol Tax to Fund Substance Abuse Treatment Programs, for three major reasons; chronic under-funding, increased public health and public acceptance:

1. CT's addiction treatment system is under-funded, struggling to make ends meet to serve thousands of individuals annually. However, without across the board rate increases in nearly 9 years and SAGA rates that meet approximately 70% of costs for providers state-wide, the struggle to treat the devastating disease of addiction becomes more and more difficult each year.
2. Increased alcohol taxes, especially beer, have been shown to reduce underage drinking. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2004) ranks Connecticut 5th for the highest rates of alcohol use and illicit drug dependence in all age categories and, with 48% of 18-25 year olds reporting binge drinking in the previous month. Respected researchers and advocates at JoinTogether.org report that "The five states with the highest beer taxes have significantly lower rates of teen binge drinking than the states with the lowest taxes".

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3. CT has not raised its beer tax since 1989, which is ranked 29th among the 50 states at 19 cents per gallon. The national average is 26 cents per gallon. Polling by the American Medical Association in 2004 clearly demonstrated that voters of both parties, including drinkers, support increased alcohol taxes that support treatment programs and off-set budget shortfalls.

I support Bill Number 5631, An Act Concerning State Spending on Community Mental Health Services, because a successful Medicaid Rehab Option (MRO) is not possible without the following:

1. Rates for community mental health services covered under the MRO through a cost-based methodology which provides for annual cost of living increases.
2. The same appropriations for DMHAS community mental health services in future fiscal years as there is in this fiscal year, including annual COLA adjustments.
3. Dollars to protect the capacity of DMHAS providers to serve their communities while transitioning to MRO services.
4. Coverage to protect providers serving Medicaid Spend-down clients.
5. Coverage for non-Medicaid services that are essential to sustaining healthy, community based living arrangements for the DMHAS population.
6. Support for initiatives and services that prevent hospitalization and institutionalization of the DMHAS population.

As you know, the Governor's budget offers no relief for rates or addiction treatment program costs at all (Bill #6088) or provides for a successful MRO. Please support these bills and the addiction and mental health treatment providers of this state so that we can continue to work for the public good, providing treatment in lieu of more costly incarceration, hospitalization and institutionalization. Thank you and I am available to answer questions you may have.