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Human Services Committee Hearing 2/26/08

Good morning/afternoon Senator Harris, Representative Villano and honorable members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, Keep the Promise Coordinator, and I am here today to testify in support of HB 5617, An Act Delaying Implementation of and making revisions to the Charter Oak Health Plan. The Keep the Promise Coalition strongly supports delaying implementation of the Charter Oak Health Plan until important revisions can be made. We have grave concerns about any state-sponsored health plan that does not follow our state mental health parity mandate which states that mental health cannot cost more than medical and surgical coverage. There is no reason for mental health not to be covered at the same level as all other health concerns. Doing otherwise is simply discrimination. The brain is just another organ and coverage should equal that of any other organ in the body.

Studies show that mental health parity has an insignificant impact on cost. The Congressional Budget Office agrees and reports a 0.4% estimated cost impact. On top of this, those findings do not take into account the cost savings that would be realized from decreased visits to emergency rooms, physicians, and other significantly more costly outcomes. Therefore any statements that adding mental health parity to the Charter Oak plan would be cost-prohibitive is not backed up by the facts.

We are also concerned about existing limitations on prescription drug coverage. Many necessary psychiatric medications would not be covered resulting in cost-prohibitive bills to the insured. Furthermore, if someone qualifies for the Charter Oak Health Plan, they would not be eligible for other prescription drug assistance... This is history repeating itself as many Medicaid recipients who were previously eligible for prescription drug assistance programs, now are not eligible due to the Medicaid Part D "trap" which we are striving to fix this session. Please don't let this plan be another thing we need to fix in retrospect.

In addition, Keep the Promise supports SB 413, An Act Establishing a Community Provider Rescue Fund Account and Community-based Services Commission. Having recently left a job at a private, non-profit mental health agency after 6 ½ years myself, I can tell you that I saw constant turnover of staff, in large part due to the huge disparity in pay between a private, non-profit position and an equivalent State of Connecticut position.

The chronic underfunding of private non-profits has resulted in them becoming

training grounds for employees where they gain experience and then leave for a State position when they finish their Master's degrees. You can't blame people for pursuing career advancement. However, the ultimate loss is felt by the people that we serve who have to, time and again, re-tell their stories and re-form trusting relationships with their providers. This is significant due to the fact that these same people often seek help for trauma-based issues where trust is essential, something that is sabotaged when one is forced to switch providers even under the best of circumstances. This can result in a lack of recovery for the many children and adults served in Connecticut.

In summary, I urge you to consider these points when making decisions that will affect some of Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens. Please support HB 5617 and SB413. Thank you.