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Appropriations Committee Testimony - 2/20/09

Good evening. My name is Claire Phelan. I am a resident of Milford and the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of a very important healthcare agency called Bridges...A Community Support System Inc. We are located, in Milford. I am here today to talk to you about the DMHAS budget and what it means to our area residents and your constituents.

Bridges provides comprehensive mental health and addiction services for children, adolescents, adults and families. Bridges is the DMHAS designated Local Mental Health Authority offering outpatient mental health and addiction services in Milford, Orange, & West Haven. We are the lead Kid Care agency for DCF providing a similar range of services for children and families, for an extended geographic area covering 12 surrounding communities. Evaluation & treatment, intensive home based services, crisis services and emergency mobile services are available to adults, children, adolescents and families. We are a grant funded agency under contract with DCF, DMHAS & DDS to provide behavioral health services to residents in 22 towns. In 2008 over 7,000 individuals and families accessed one of our services.

Bridges has been serving our local communities for over 50years, through partnerships with not only the state, but local sources such as the City of Milford, Town of Orange and the Milford United Way. In addition we are through foundations and the US Dept of Education for the provision of community and school based prevention services. We are also a DSS designated Enhanced Care Clinic...

I proudly mention all of this since our Board of Director and hundreds of community volunteers who have worked to support this over the last 50 years are now deeply concerned with the current fiscal crisis and its potential to erode if not severely damage all that our community has built. As hard working residents and volunteers of our local communities we are aware of the difficult job you have before you. But I am here today to urge you to strengthen state support for these vital services even in the face of the fiscal crisis before us.

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Many of us have had family members who have used these services, and we know very well what would happen if they were not available. One of our past board members spoke to you last night of her own family experience, and how the wonderful Recovery services of Bridges had enabled one of her family members to live independently in the community after many years of hospitalization in a state facility. It is examples like this that make our Board and community so passionate about Bridges and similar agencies throughout Connecticut.

During these difficult times more people are seeking our service. Our CEO Barry Kasdan provided me with some dramatic figures. In the first 7 months of this fiscal year over 2300 calls came in to Bridges asking for help. But we have only been able to do intakes and evaluations for about 530 individuals. Years of underfunding have forced us to cut back in so many areas. Today we have 6 full time positions frozen.

Every month our CEO presents to the Board and gives us reports and information. I can see the frustration and concern he has in not being able to serve all the people who are asking for our help. When I hear that residential and hospital bed costs in Connecticut can run from \$250,000 to \$800,000 dollars a year I and my fellow Board members are startled and confused as to why the state would not invest even more in community services, knowing that it keeps people out of these institutions, but if that is needed, allows them to return to their community much sooner.

With the fiscal crisis we face isn't that just common sense as to where our tax dollars ought to go? The cost of those beds represents 2500 to 6000 treatment sessions at Bridges....which equates to 130 to 250 more people being seen in community based treatment.

I implore you to strengthen not weaken DMHAS funded community services. Invest in our communities and I can assure you that our Board I along with other non-profits will give you a real return on wisely invested tax dollars.