

Testimony Submitted to Members of the General Assembly
February 20, 2009
Sheryl Breetz, North Central Regional Mental Health Board

Members of Appropriations Committee, Senator Harp and Representative Geragosian:

North Central Regional Mental Health Board, as mandated by state statutes, conducts independent evaluations of services provided by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and involves the people who use services, their families, and concerned citizens in providing feedback to continuously improve services. Regional Mental Health Boards carry out evaluations through hundreds of volunteers in the State.

We recognize the unprecedented enormity of your task this year to keep the State of Connecticut and its citizens physically, mentally, and financially healthy. We recognize that decreased funding in some areas is necessary for DMHAS, while cuts in other areas may soon lead to even greater costs for the State. We also recognize that increased funding in some areas will yield great returns, be cost effective, and represent wise management even in times of fiscal duress.

I urge you to support the increased funding in the Governor's budget for DMHAS to serve additional young adults in their Young Adult Services. You, as members of the General Assembly, have provided leadership and funding for development of these services. This is a wise investment that will yield greater payoff in increased chances for recovery, decreasing dependence on services, and decreased use of hospitals and jails.

Worldwide data shows that mental illnesses carry some of the greatest burdens for the individual and society of any illnesses. Mental illness touches every aspect of life and begins relatively early in life in young adulthood. Left without effective treatment, mental illness results in a life long burden of disability for the individual and enormous costs for the State.

The National Conference of State Legislatures' September 2006 Policy Brief concluded that "failing to help youth successfully transition to adulthood can be costly to individuals and governments in the long run." It estimates that 90 percent of adults with serious mental illness are unemployed – the lowest rate of employment of any group of people with disabilities. Changing this outcome has major implications for cost savings since mental illnesses now account for 25% of all disability in major industrialized countries.

DMHAS has adopted a focus on recovery with the goal of reducing disability rates and helping consumers become productive members of society – educated, employed, and managing their illness. This goal will serve its clients and the State well. I ask the Appropriations Committee to support this goal. Our "A Day in the Life" interview project documents the words of DMHAS clients who have already, or who desperately want to, reach higher levels in their recovery.

I also ask you to examine a number of options in other state agency budgets that will affect DMHAS clients and result in increased costs. For example, the co-pays and prior

authorization proposed for Medicaid clients will result in many DMHAS clients not getting their medications and spiraling downward. Imagine how the distress of trying to pay co-pays, waiting for prior authorization, and navigating the bureaucracy that manages this process will affect people who are already burdened with mental illness, anxiety, and very little money. Our survey shows that currently large numbers of people on Medicaid Spend-Downs are extremely distressed because they cannot get beyond the voice mails of Department of Social Services (DSS) workers. This will only worsen with the new proposals.

Psychiatric distress has real consequences. Already some general hospitals are reporting that more people with psychiatric distress are coming into emergency departments- new people that have not come for help before. This economy is negatively affecting people, and there is an increasing awareness that this can happen to anyone. I am afraid that seeking mental health care will be a growth sector in this economy.

Yes, indeed, in this economy, we have more to fear than fear itself. We have to preserve the capacity of DMHAS to address projected growing mental health needs, while asking them to share in the cuts that all agencies must find. I ask you to preserve the good balance for our citizens. I know your job will not be easy. Please call on us if you would like us to gather specific information about any funding issues.

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. . . . to ensure that citizens are involved in determining and monitoring the kind of mental health services provided in Connecticut.