



KEEP THE PROMISE COALITION

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**Testimony before the Planning and Development Committee  
In Opposition to: HB 6596  
March 5, 2009**

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Sharkey, and members of the Planning and Development Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, Coordinator of the statewide Keep the Promise Coalition. The Coalition was formed in 1999 after the closure of two large state psychiatric hospitals to ensure implementation of the promise to create and sustain a comprehensive, community mental health system. That promise has not been kept.

Commissioner Kirk from DMHAS (Dept. of Mental Health and Addiction Services) has testified that the system is in a state of "paralysis", in large part due to the lack of safe, affordable housing in the community. Many people with mental illness are stuck in costly institutions including the "new institutions" such as nursing homes, homelessness, revolving emergency room visits, and even jails and prisons due to minor, non-violent offenses.

The other large hurdle for people with mental illness is accepting and getting appropriate treatment, sometimes due to a lack of resources or health care, but more often due to the huge amount of stigma facing a person diagnosed with a biological brain disorder – a no-fault illness. The Coalition believes that HB 6596 would be toxic on both counts. It would make it harder for people with mental illness to find housing in the community, already a near-impossible task, and its stigmatizing efforts to track where people with mental illness live will make it less likely that people will seek treatment.

Keep the Promise Coalition feels that HB 6596, An Act Concerning Notification Requirements for halfway houses, is blatantly discriminatory to people with mental illness and others. The Coalition sees no reason why the chief of police, fire chief and



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chief elected official of a municipality would need to know about an "application, petition, request or plan" in reference to a "halfway house, group home, mental health facility or approved community residence." The fire chief would already know about any existing group homes or facilities via regular inspections. The information police would need to know to deal with a psychiatric crisis **anywhere** in the community can be learned through programs such as C.I.T. (Crisis Intervention Team) trainings where officers are taught about mental illness and how to keep themselves and people with mental illness safe in a crisis situation. This is something that is not likely to be an issue in settings such as Supportive Housing where supports are available nearby or on site. We believe that implementation of this bill would create the dangerous opportunity to discriminate against critically needed housing in communities: a "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) mentality that is noxious and misinformed.

There are many myths and misconceptions surrounding people who have mental illness. The media has perpetuated the myth of violence. This myth often comes up around the subject of gun control. People with mental illness are often singled out as being the most likely to commit violent acts with guns. According to Otto Wahl, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Graduate Institute of Professional Psychology at the University of Hartford, "In reality mental illness is a poor predictor of violence." In fact far better predictors of violence include young age, being male, substance abuse, and a previous history of violence. Based on this research, we should first consider creating a housing database of all young people and men long before we consider a database of housing for people with mental illness. **In fact, people with mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence.**

Furthermore, the only other public housing database that comes to mind is for sex offenders, a database whose sole intent is to protect the public. The thought that people who have an illness would be subjected to the same public scrutiny is absolutely ludicrous. Would we do this to people who have heart disease? How about cancer or diabetes? The idea is outrageous and we should react the same when it comes to the biologically based brain disorder called mental illness.



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We urge legislators to oppose this highly discriminatory bill and give people with mental illness and others the same opportunity to live a safe, peaceful life in the community as everyone else. It is their right to do. According to the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, Connecticut's Discriminatory Housing Practices Act prohibits discrimination in housing based on race, national origin, ancestry, creed (religion), sex, marital status, age, familial status, lawful source of income, sexual orientation, AND disability, including mental illness. We must not allow this to change. Please oppose HB 6596. Thank you for your time.

