

## COMMUNITY SERVICES ARE BETTER THAN INSTITUTIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES

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Madam Chairman and members of the Appropriations Committee: I am Marc Jacques from Norwich. I am an expert on the ins and outs and ups and downs of state funding for people with disabilities. I grew up in a middle class but abusive family in Bozrah, where I learned how to be manipulative. I have spent the intervening decades learning how to live constructively in the community with the help of mental health programs and, occasionally, the criminal justice system.

I believe very strongly that the only place to learn to *live* in the community is *in* the community. I am a past President of the Community Advisory Board of the Southeastern Mental Health Authority and current President of the Member Advisory Board of Reliance House. I have *taught* advocacy skills for Advocacy Unlimited and been on many committees and boards, including the State Board of Mental Health.

I could not have learned the skills needed for these roles in jail. You learn *different* skills in jail. For someone who wants to lead a constructive life, the only place to learn to take the feelings and needs of others into account is where people are free to agree or disagree, free to accept or refuse your offer of help. I was born with talent and intelligence, but I could not learn to use them well at home. I needed structure and limits, but I had to be in the community, where counselors, case managers and other consumers of mental health services—clients, to the uninitiated—were able to teach me.

Violent and abusive people need to be in jail. Nonviolent people with mental illnesses do not. Every person with a mental illness who is in jail because community programs did not have the staff or the room to keep him or her out, *wastes* \$40,000 a year of state money—probably more with staff overtime and overcrowding. That money goes a lot farther in the community. Staff are cheaper. Food and housing come out of other budgets. People learn work and self-reliance. They learn social skills, not antisocial ones.

It has taken me *years* to change my reputation in the community. Each challenge I master and each reward I earn raises new challenges. I will never forget the police officers years ago who *apologized* when they had to arrest me on an old technicality because they knew I was trying to do better and had been *succeeding*.

I hope you will not use the budget crisis as an excuse to cut programs that make people better citizens, that make them *less* disabled by their illnesses and histories. Thank you for your attention.