

**Testimony of Michael Foy Mitchell
Plantsville, CT
Appropriations Committee
20 February 2008**

Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, members of the committee; I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I sit here in modesty, hopefully representing the voices of the nearly 11,000 Connecticut residents living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. I also represent a generation of individuals whose lives were lost struggling to overcome three potentially overwhelming foes: bigotry, apathy, and ignorance. These are the weapons of our enemy, HIV. Compassion and will are our shield and weapon.

Governor Rell has proposed that Commissioner Galvin reduce Connecticut's funding for programs utilized by our friends and relatives living with HIV disease and AIDS. Not everyone understands the enormity of her actions and I wonder how many advocates and people living with this disease were consulted on the impact of these cuts. I know from my personal experience of calling the Governor's and the Commissioner's offices that my calls were not returned and in the case of the Governor, her staff would not even take my name or phone number. Five times I called her office; five times I was brushed off.

It was only through your compassion and will and the actions of compassionate and willful advocates that Connecticut has been able to piece together a continuum of care that ensures the protection of those less fortunate than I. I implore you to not allow the gradual erosion of these literally life-saving services.

I speak from experience when I say to you that HIV destroys people's lives in ways one would never anticipate. I have seen the hopelessness a Mother infected with HIV shows when wondering how she will raise her children and face the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to her seeing them attend elementary school; prom; or perhaps even college. I've sat with my friends as they have drawn their last breath in pain and in relief. I have had friends and know people who, when faced with a diagnosis of HIV turn their lives over to drugs and alcohol in an effort to erase it from their minds and distance themselves from their all too real destiny. I have seen the desperation and despondency with which people affected by this virus view their world and the roads they must walk in order to ensure their survival. One more barrier can lead them rapidly down a spiraling path toward their own death.

Medical case management; mental and emotional health services; transportation to necessary medical appointments; and perhaps even more importantly, a compassionate

voice on the other end of a phone call or a loaf of bread and a can of soup can mean the difference between living your life and accepting defeat.

You all may not have noticed, but I'm not originally from Connecticut. Some folks say it's my accent while others say it's my life experience that gives me away. You see, I grew up on a farm in Mossy Grove, Alabama – in the same house my daddy grew up in. I graduated from high school in 1982. I heard about the gay cancer from my relatives up North. I had no idea that within ten years of my graduating college that half of my gay friends would be dead and all of my gay African-American friends I knew while attending college would be dead.

Living with HIV and watching my loved ones die or lose themselves to the traps of bigotry, apathy or ignorance has not been easy. I've been deeply affected. Sometimes, my armor is not enough and I am left scarred by what I see happening to people I know and to those I have yet to meet. When I needed someone to talk to and when I needed a loaf of bread to get me through to my next pay check so I could afford to keep buying my medications, I knew that compassionate people like you had stood up for what is right and had the will to say, "It is not acceptable to allow those affected by HIV live their lives in despair. I will do something."

Today, I ask you to show that will again and repute the Governor's proposition to drastically erode the safety net so many people in our state rely on every day.

Thank you.