

Testimony of **Walt Kita**
193 East Main Street
Middletown Ct 06457
walt_kita@yahoo.com
860-817-9260

Good evening. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address this committee.

I am Walt Kita, a vocational counselor for a private non-profit agency in Middletown that helps people with psychiatric disabilities obtain and maintain competitive employment.

I'd like to talk to you today about a longstanding problem that has cost the state and federal government many millions of wasted tax dollars over more than 20 years, one that may, in fact, be making the lives of patients with psychiatric illnesses worse instead of better.

Scores of mentally ill individuals, including some that had formerly lived in psychiatric hospitals, are warehoused today in privately-run, for-profit residential care facilities better known as "rest homes."

Typically, two adults are crammed into a 10 x 10 room along with all their worldly possessions; they share a bathroom with a dozen more others like them on the same floor. They may get a fried egg for breakfast, a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and pasta every night of the week for dinner. They get no therapy and little if any supervision. Indeed, they are largely ignored by the underpaid and overworked staff. Last October, one resident of a Haddam rest home wandered off, and was found dead in a nearby state park days later. No one had bothered to report him missing.

Stories of heavily medicated, psychiatrically impaired rest home residents roaming the community in pursuit of street drugs are not as uncommon as you might suppose. For most, loneliness and accompanying depression are daily facts of life; skirmishes between rest home residents are fairly common.

And here's something that may really surprise you: the cost for these "lavish" accommodations ranges from between \$2,700 and \$3,000 per individual, per month. (FYI: That's not much less than a private room in an assisted living facility with 24-hour nursing care and all the comforts of home.) Rest home residents pay only a small portion of the total from their social security income. The state Department of Social Services picks up the remainder of the tab, as much as \$2,500 in some cases. Do the math. With scores of these facilities scattered about the state's 169 municipalities, the cost to taxpayers is nothing short of staggering – many, many millions of dollars over the couple of decades the system has been in place.

To put it bluntly: The **only** ones benefiting from this situation are the rest home owners. No wonder it's a growing industry.

I'm sure this is not what the state had in mind when it began closing its psychiatric hospitals 20 years ago. Instead of hiding the mentally ill on a ward at Connecticut Valley Hospital, today the state is paying – and paying --to hide these individuals under our very noses. There has to be a better, more cost-effective way of helping such people. In Middletown, where I live, I know of only one private, non-profit agency that offers a viable alternative to the expensive rest home system. That's not nearly enough.

Some weeks ago, and with much fanfare, Governor Jody Rell awarded more than half-million in state bond money to fund improvements to a failed ski resort in Middlebury, a proposed boondoggle that, thankfully, now seems dead in the water. My suggestion: Why not issue bonds for developers and non-profits to create and operate affordable options to rest homes?

Such a move would save tax dollars, create jobs and better serve the mentally ill by providing shelter, integrated case management services and therapy under one roof.

The mentally ill comprise a long-neglected, badly stigmatized and substantial population within our society. These people aren't going anywhere. And neither is the problem of the rest homes. It needs to be addressed now.

Thank you for your kind attention.