

Feb, 18, 2010

## DHMAS BUDGET HEARING

Good Evening members of the Appropriations Committee, Senators, Toni Harp (Chair), Joan Hartley (Vice Chair).

My name is Elizabeth Gerhard. I am a Community Support Specialist, employed by Chrysalis Center, a non-profit mental health organization. I am a registered voter and I provide case management services for with people between the ages of 18- 81 years who have some form of mental illness, many also have substance abuse addictions. My work brings me out in the community to people's homes in the towns of West Hartford, Farmington, Avon, Canton, Simsbury and Hartford, and I live in Vernon, CT. All of the people I provide support for are also active voters in their districts.

I am a NAMI- CT and NAMI- Manchester board member, a family member, consumer and provider of mental health services. I am here to testify this evening to assure access to housing and community based mental health services.

It is not cost effective to balance the budget by cutting services to the most vulnerable in our state. We cannot continue to cut or underfund housing and community based mental health services that have been proven to be cost effective with achievable solutions. Lack of safe and affordable housing, lack of access to good mental health care providers and community supports have contributed to wasted lives and wasted dollars by forcing people with serious mental illness into expensive settings including prisons, nursing homes, emergency rooms, homeless shelters, and state hospitals.

Community Based Mental Health organizations, such as Chrysalis Center have been able to help people with severe mental illness decrease symptoms and become more productive in their communities by helping them access appropriate individualized health care, benefits, supportive housing, employment and education. Many of the people I work with are stable and successfully living in their own apartments in the community. Many are working and paying taxes and enjoying life to their fullest potential. Many have decreased mental illness symptoms, decreased isolation and hospitalizations because of the supports and services they receive from our agency. However, this will not continue if the state cuts funding or continues to underfund programs that have provided these beneficial support services.

As a Community Support Specialist I have been able to help people find and maintain employment, enroll in college and other adult education courses, and locate affordable housing. I have taught many people how to advocate for themselves, many of whom have testified before you on numerous occasions.

Chrysalis Center employees are the direct care workers who motivate and encourage people to reach their goals; we are their advocates, their educators, and their community supports. We are the system navigators, facilitators, negotiators, and more importantly, the people who care enough to tell them the truth and hold them accountable. We help people get better and give back. All this is possible because of the agency I work for and the funding provided to us from DHMAS and other funders.

A young adult whom I work with is 23 years old; he has Schizophrenia, learning disabilities, and depression. One year ago, he was living in a four bedroom apartment with three other roommates paying \$975.00 to rent

one of those bedrooms. His parents were paying for half his rent, which was a financial burden for both his parents and him. He isolated and had increased symptoms of his illness. Through the relationships Chrysalis Center has built with other community providers and collaborations we have with landlords, as his assigned Community Support Specialist, I was able to find him safe affordable housing that didn't require money from his parents. His goal was to return to college so he could get an education. He also wanted to work part-time while going to school. I was able to assist him with the enrollment in a community college and set up supports with school counselors, his parents, and his medical providers that would assist with that would provide supports and accommodations when he had setbacks. These were also important for accommodations for his learning disability. I also connected him to a Disability Navigator from CT Works who will help him find the best part-time job for his individual needs. Today, he is stable and independent. Both he and his parents have told me that none of this would have been possible without the support, knowledge and linkage to other community support services that I have facilitated on his behalf.

Another individual I've worked with over the last year lived in a residential group home for over 10 years. She is now living in her own apartment, working part-time, soon to be full-time; she drives a car, goes to the gym, sees her medical providers to maintain her physical and mental health, and is working on rebuilding family relationships. Every once in a while she has a setback, but with our support, it has been short lived and she continues today to make great progress in her recovery.

A veteran who came to us homeless after serving in the military for 12 years, which included working at the Pentagon for 6 years, is now living in his own apartment, maintaining his mental health through VA services we linked him to, and he recently enrolled in college, and reconnected with his 16 year old daughter who he hasn't seen since she was 3 years old. All which was possible because of the supports and resources I was able to provide as an employee of Chrysalis center.

I plead with you today; do not allow the state budget to be balanced on the backs of the state's most vulnerable. It costs over \$40,000.00 to house a person in a prison each year vs. \$13,000.00-\$15,000.00 for Supportive Housing. Please continue to fund what is most cost effective and has a higher return for our tax dollars spent.

Thank you for allowing me this time to testify.

Elizabeth Gerhard, Community Support Specialist

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