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The 2010 DMHAS and DSS Budgets
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At first glance, the Governor's DMHAS budget seems deceptively benign, reflecting OPM's confidence in DMHAS' commitment to proactive redesign of services and its remarkable ability to bring in competitive federal grants. Time and again, e.g., with Access to Recovery, Transformation, and Veteran's Trauma Services, Connecticut has been one of the first five or six states to get an award. This is a vote of confidence for a talented regime, which continues under Pat Rehmer.

However, I do not want to convey the idea that we are satisfied with the DMHAS budget just because other people were hurt worse. We are long past that kind of cynical rivalry—though combining agencies with very different cultures and service models would surely reignite it. DMHAS works better now on shared multi-issue clients, but the separation allows them to focus on *clients*, not procedural norms and traditions. We learned from merging mental health and addiction services that mergers must be of limited scale, with clear *clinical* benefit and supported by the generational change that come with early retirements.

There are significant cuts to DMHAS, but the bigger issue is that **changes in the DSS budget affect DMHAS clients**. Again and again the governor and Sec. Genuario propose the same cuts, forcing us to protest and you to put them back. This diverts us all from the constructive work of improving the system and the *lives* of people with mental illnesses and other disabilities. And each time, the crisis is so deep, the press of business so strong, or the need to compromise so great that some of the cuts go through and a good system frays even further.

DSS is an accomplice in this dismal annual ritual. Last Thursday, speaker after speaker gave you the same desperate message: these cuts are false economies that will force stable people into more expensive crisis and hospital services. They were right. You know that, and will not be fooled. However, one trend concerns me. Last term and this, an unusual number of your most enlightened colleagues have left or intend to leave the legislature in frustration. I share your frustration, and I urge you to do one big thing before you go: **reform DSS**.

There is always talk about combining agencies, but the easiest targets are not the best. Collapsing more agencies into the morass of DSS will only worsen the problem. The real problem is the *culture* of DSS, or of the good people who have been forced into its present unworkable form. When eligibility workers have caseloads of 1500—or even half that—they can't do much for any of them. How many times have *each* of you heard from constituents about full voicemail boxes and document snafus? Of documents becoming outdated so the process must begin again? That system breeds contempt for clients. It makes *paper* its goal instead of client needs. It uses rules to *disqualify*. It makes *cynicism* a major tool in its underlying agenda of discrediting state service and state services.

What can you do? Maybe nothing. But I am tired of coming here year after year to put my finger in some leak or another while the whole system sweats and heaves. It is time for you to ask DSS managers and workers why they are there. If they have learned that "no" is the safest answer or if they have forgotten that clients are people, find them work elsewhere. Motivated workers' benefits to *clients* will benefit *society* as they recover their dignity and get what they need to succeed.