

**Testimony of Thomas A. Kirk, Jr., Ph.D., Commissioner
Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services
Before the Public Health Committee**

February 21, 2007

With regard to S.B. 666, An Act Concerning Safe Residential Treatment Facilities for Effective Recovery,

DMHAS has some concerns regarding the bill's intent and would like to work with you to resolve whatever problems exist for communities that offer housing alternatives to people in recovery from substance use disorders.

At the outset, I should clarify that the language in **S.B. 666** refers to "residential treatment facilities." The sober congregate living houses to which DMHAS provides support are not licensed residential treatment facilities, but rather are a safe, sober, supportive and affordable environment where recovering people reside while they engage in treatment off-site, attend peer-run meetings, and transition back to work. That distinction having been made, it should be noted that research has proven that housing, jobs and relationships are the keys by which persons with substance use disorders can recover and become productive members of society. We know that peer support can keep a person from relapsing during the recovery process. Sober houses provide that much needed support to individuals in our system in measurable ways. Perhaps a brief history would be helpful.

In 1997 the General Assembly transferred responsibility to DMHAS for managing state-administered General Assistance (SAGA) behavioral health benefits. In 1998, a fund was created for DMHAS to pay for basic needs—such as housing, clothing and transportation—for individuals who are seeking or engaged in treatment. Previously, such monies were given to individuals with behavioral health needs for them to spend as they saw fit. Legislators at that time wanted to change that practice, so they created the Basic Needs Program. A large percentage of this program's funding pays for housing—specifically, "sober" or peer-run housing— which offers not only a roof over someone's head, but also ongoing support, house rules and AA meetings, and relationships, that research has shown time and time again help an individual to sustain his or her recovery. Our goal is to provide those living in state-funded sober houses with safe housing. We recognize the delicate balance between the need of a city or town to ensure that houses are compliant with local zoning laws and the need of individuals in recovery to have such housing available. To that end, we have developed a certification process to ensure that local zoning laws are followed. We believe that this process will assure that the sober houses to which DMHAS provides support have heat, hot water and electricity, and that the homes do not exceed the capacity set by local zoning ordinances.

DMHAS works closely with Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR), a statewide advocacy organization that has made impressive inroads in helping those with substance use disorders to make a successful transition to recovery. We are also in the process of setting up meetings with officials in both Norwich and Preston, who have expressed concerns about this type of housing in their towns, and it is our intention to

work with them regarding their concerns. As the committee weighs these issues, it is important to note that such housing is a linchpin in the recovery process, because it provides structure for the residents and requires that they participate in activities that assist them on the road to recovery. Society as a whole benefits when individuals are able to reclaim their lives and become productive, contributing members.

If the goal of the local zoning boards and this committee is to ensure that individuals residing in their towns live in safe houses, rest assured that DMHAS has the same exact goal, and we will continue to work diligently toward that goal. If the committee deems that we need to change our process to accommodate community concerns, then please allow us the opportunity to work with you to do that.

Good Neighbors in Recovery

Recovery housing is a vital component of a comprehensive Recovery Support Service system. People at various stages of recovery from substance use and/or co-occurring disorders need a safe place to live. Individuals in recovery across the state have quietly created a number of dignified, safe "recovery houses" where people are given a nurturing environment in which to rebuild their lives and begin the process of living in mainstream society. **People living in recovery houses are good neighbors** - they keep their yards clean and their houses in good repair. They "give back to the community," a major component of recovery. They want their recovery houses to feel like homes...to feel and be like families.



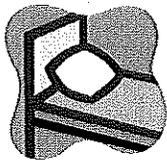
The main theme in all successful recovery houses is *one person in recovery helping another:*

- Sharing household responsibilities and meals
- Caring compassionately about one another
- Feeling passionately about recovery
- Learning to get along with others
- Helping each other in daily lives

STANDARDS FOR RECOVERY HOUSING

The Recovery Housing Coalition (RHC), comprised of Recovery House owners throughout the state and facilitated by Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR), has established *minimum standards* to open and operate a Recovery House to ensure quality and safe housing for persons in recovery and to protect the integrity of the recovery housing industry. The standards cover:

- Mission statements
- Written house rules
- Admission criteria
- Supervision requirements
- Health and safety
- Living accommodations
- Residents' grievance policies
- Drug and alcohol screening policies



CCAR provides ongoing training, "So You Want to Open a Recovery House" to teach people how to operate safe, lawful and respectable housing for people in recovery.

Contact CCAR at 860-244-2227 to learn about an exciting web-based directory of recovery houses across the state soon to be launched.

What do Recovery House Residents Have to Say?

- ◆ Sober Housing can bring society one step closer to ridding our communities of drugs. *Anonymous*
- ◆ A neighborhood with a sober house is better than one without one. They keep people who are using out of the neighborhoods rather than bringing them in. I hope people realize this before being against sober living. *Anonymous*
- ◆ If it weren't for this house, I would have been homeless, jobless, and hopeless. I am now working on my marriage, employed, have my own vehicle, and I am able to have a relationship with my children. *Adam S.*
- ◆ I believe if I didn't have a place like this, I would not still be clean. It gives me hope of a new way of life, one without drugs or alcohol. *Anonymous*
- ◆ This place has saved a lot of lives. Mine included. *Milton B.*
- ◆ In July I will celebrate 8 years clean. I truly believe I would never have made it this far without the foundation made possible by the recovery house I lived in. *Eric L.*