



**Testimony before the General Law Committee
March 8, 2011
HB 6389**

Good afternoon, chairs and members of the General Law Committee. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I am the Public Policy Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI-CT. We are the largest member organization in the state of people with mental health conditions and their families.

I am here today to express our opposition to the proposed merger of the Office of the Health Care Advocate (OHA) into the Department of Consumer Protection. We understand the pressing need to consolidate certain agencies and improve efficiencies within state government. However, it is our understanding that OHA is paid for through an assessment on insurers and is already an efficient operation that saves Connecticut consumers roughly \$4.00 for every dollar the office spends on consumer advocacy.

NAMI-CT refers numerous people from the broader community who are struggling to understand their rights or feel they are being discriminated against or treated unjustly by their insurance provider. The OHA has the expertise, independence and authority to guide people through extremely complex insurance regulations, and when appropriate, work with insurers to facilitate solutions.

Moving this agency under the Administration would eliminate its ability to operate independently and to adequately represent the best interests of consumers, which is its primary purpose. The loss of independence would mean it could not independently advocate for consumers. OHA has been a critical resource on mental health parity issues at the state and federal levels in our state and in advocating for adequate implementation and sustaining these protections. If OHA was under the Administration and under Consumer Protection the office could not advocate strongly in opposition to an Administration driven proposal or plan, as it did when the past Administration introduced a state health plan for the uninsured without mental health parity under Charter Oak. OHA makes important policy recommendation to the Legislature that again would be negatively impacted by being under Consumer Protection.

If OHA loses its independence, it simply cannot fulfill its responsibilities in educating consumers on their health care options, educating and advocating for consumers rights within the health care system, representing consumers who face denials of care, advising the Legislature on health care issues, and proposing health care policies to improve health care systems in Connecticut.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.