

Testimony Relating to
H.B. 5123 and H.B. 5259
of
February 7, 2011

As the parent of a deaf and autistic child living in a group home, the bills which appear before you this day are of particular concern.

There are a myriad of barriers to those who struggle with physical and mental barriers in our culture at this time. Perhaps one of the most challenging is simply the necessity to have a roof over ones head. In so many cases, you will find those with these challenges living on our streets, waiting in hospitals, populating our prisons, or simply scraping by day by day, with little opportunity for hope in a better tomorrow.

For my son, who is both deaf and autistic, the opportunity to live in the only group home serving the deaf in Connecticut, has been a true God send. He has been given the opportunity to live with a group of deaf people, share in daily responsibilities, make use of public transportation, work at a job nearby, and grow to become a contributing member of society.

Unfortunately, I have come to know, working as a member of the volunteer Board of the Mental Health Association of Connecticut, a non-profit organization that has served the mentally ill of this state for over a hundred years, that he is the exception to the rule.

Even in the current environment, group homes are hard to locate, and implementation of the mechanics of this bill, are most likely to make them even more so. Siting issues are already a barrier to development of necessary community services and residential options for people with serious mental illnesses, often causing people to remain in state hospital beds at \$1,200 per day. Do we wish to make expensive hospital care the alternative to community living? I think we tried that for the better part of over a millennium. They were called mental institutions, and if you wish to review how well they worked, take a look at the displays at the Institute of Living some afternoon. So I would question whether creating additional barriers through public hearing processes, and pointing out the disabilities, would be anything but a regression.

Housing, jobs and community services are the legs of the stool upon which a recovery from a mental illness must be built. People with psychiatric disabilities have protections under state and federal law. Their health care information is protected and cannot be shared with the public. Having a public hearing concerning the siting of a group home puts the community on notice that those who reside within it have certain protected conditions which makes those conditions public. Do we really want to have the state and municipalities conducting hearings that may also be violating the federal Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, by targeting persons who have disabilities and discriminating against them on that basis? I would think not.

Additionally, the thought behind conducting public hearings relating to group homes would appear to be unlawful. The Equal Protection Clause of the Connecticut State Constitution guarantees people with disabilities protection from discrimination as a protected class, the same as it does for race, religion, etc. Would we require a public hearing if a minority, ethnic or religious person moved in next door? The truth is that public hearing processes, applied in this way, are often used as obstacles by those who have adopted the attitude of 'not in my backyard.' They will thus discourage those who would provide these services, by overlaying a costly, time consuming and uncertain outcome to a process that is already difficult.

The goal needs to continue to advance that which we have already accomplished over the last few decades.....treating those with mental illness with the respect that they deserve as fellow human beings. We need to make available to them, in a community based environment, the same necessary means of support that we all enjoy. By doing so, they can achieve a worthwhile purpose in life, and have the equal opportunity to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I would urge you to consider rejection of the approach as envisioned in these bills as one that will make the situation worse, rather than better, for those individuals so in need of our understanding and help.

With thanks for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edwin M. Norse', written over a horizontal line.

Edwin M. Norse

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