

February 22, 2012

Testimony to the Public Health Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee

Fran Ludwig, Parent of a son with mental illness, and Vice-President of the Board of Directors of Gilead Community Services

HB 5014 – AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2013 – DMHAS Budget

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Committee. My name is Fran Ludwig. I am the parent of a son who lives with mental illness. He faces enormous obstacles in his life, but has the same needs for dignity and a satisfying quality of life that you and I share. Ben is fortunate to qualify for support through DMHAS, and extremely fortunate to receive those services through Gilead Community Services. In his 23 years Ben has received services from a wide variety of providers, but it has been Gilead that has provided him with a therapeutic environment that has transformed his life and ours. However, I am deeply concerned about the future availability of those services.

In addition to being the parent of a son with mental illness, I also have the privilege of serving as Vice-President of the Board of Directors for Gilead Community Services. This gives me the rare opportunity to see the delivery of services not only from the recipient's perspective, but also from the administrative point of view. I don't think you will find anywhere a higher quality organization with a more intelligent, compassionate and committed staff. They have done yeoman's work in finding creative ways to stretch dollars without compromising client services. But there comes a time when even the loaves and fishes run out and programs and services have to be cut. Gilead has passed that point.

The problem is that the wages Gilead can afford to pay can't compete with the private sector and don't provide an adequate living wage in the state of Connecticut. In addition, state funding for mental health programs has been flat for the past four and a half years while costs to provide those services have risen sharply. There's been no money for salary increases and services have been

reduced. With less support, clients do more poorly, have more crises, are hospitalized more frequently or wind up back in prison or in a nursing home. This is not only upsetting and discouraging to clients who do much better when they can live in the community, but it is ultimately far more costly to the state. Properly funding community support programs actually saves money.

I urge you to look at community service providers such as Gilead as partners in achieving the goals of the state. Last year, with the addition of one new program, Gilead created 42 new jobs and saved the state hundreds of thousands of dollars while improving the quality of life for clients living with mental illness and traumatic brain injury. This is a win-win-win situation. We're ready and eager to work with you. The proposed 1% increase in program funding is a small step in the direction we need to go. I urge you to consider instating that increase on July 1 of this year so that we can begin the process of recovering from years of stagnant funding.

Ben is not just a number on a spreadsheet. He's a wonderful human being who happens to suffer from mental illness. There are 600 other Bens who depend on Gilead for support and stability, and that's just in Middlesex County. If we do what is necessary to preserve their dignity, we preserve ours as well.

Thank you.

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