

Testimony before the Judiciary Committee

April 15, 2013

In SUPPORT of

HB 6684 - An Act Concerning the Establishment of an Intake, Referral and Intervention System Relating to the Provision and Delivery of Mental Health Services

Dear Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Karen Zimmer and I write in full support of HB 6684. Such legislation will help our most vulnerable souls who suffer from the most severe forms of mental illness. Although the state of CT does have reasonably good mental health services for some people, those with the most severe forms of mental illness have been increasingly left behind since de-institutionalization. They are using huge amounts of state resources, without benefit to themselves. They languish in our prisons, utilize precious police time and energy, as well as emergency room resources. They do not have insight that they have an illness, and therefore tend to forego treatment. They may be violent, especially if they combine drug and alcohol use with refusing treatment and the stress of being homeless. All of us function best when we have our basic needs met. Even the healthiest among us would have trouble if we had no safe place to call our own, (including lack of healthy food, a way to keep ourselves and our clothes clean).

My son is an example of a person who would benefit from services mentioned in HB 6684. He is currently incarcerated for several months for breach of peace. He has lived in rooming houses because he cannot afford an apartment, nor does he stay stable enough to maintain good relations with his neighbors. He consistently refuses treatment. When his stress levels go up, his behavior deteriorates. For the past 17 years he has been in and out of prisons, homelessness, recovery houses, hospitals, residential treatment for addiction, and emergency rooms, much of which has been paid for by our taxes. When in prison, he often has trouble with cell mates and has spent weeks in solitary confinement. Sometimes he actually feels better in jail because the stress of having to fend for himself on the street is harder than prison, and I hate to admit it, but my stress levels go down when he is incarcerated as well, because I know he won't freeze to death and I know where he is.

Yet my son wants to stay out of trouble and have a more normal life. He loves to read, and has a library card. When he has a place of his own, even a little room, he generally keeps himself and the room very tidy and will shop and cook for himself healthy meals. He can do chores for his landlords, and has a wonderful work ethic, when he is doing well. The provisions in HB 6684 would help my son in his recovery process. I especially approve of the provisions to expand housing alternatives and respite services. We as a society give the best treatment to those who have the most severe physical illnesses. We should do the same for those with the most severe mental illnesses. It will save money and resources in the long run, and most importantly, it is the right thing to do.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Karen Zimmer, Storrs, CT