

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee
In Support of HB 6684
April 15, 2013**

Good morning/afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg Acker and I am testifying today 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.

I strongly support this bill which is intended to combine proven strategies to promote person-centered recovery, in this case for people whose needs have NOT been met by traditional system treatment models. As someone who grew up watching my mother go in and out of State hospitals for decades, these changes are long overdue. She needlessly experienced homelessness, the criminal justice system, and multiple instances of trauma, as did our family, as a result of not only her mental health symptoms, but more importantly the way multiple systems responded, or failed to respond, to her needs. We have an opportunity to begin to change the latter today.

I'd like to focus on the peer aspect of the bill. We have all been in situations where we only felt truly understood by someone has gone through the same or similar situation. Best practice communication dictates "Seek first to understand." When we feel understood, we feel respected. When we feel respected, we are then open to hearing what the other person has to say.

The peer support model is utilized in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) for instance. Many medical disease models now incorporate peers to ease the treatment and recovery processes. Why wouldn't we fully utilize peers to optimize mental health treatment? I think of my own experiences: as a "Daughter" of a person labeled with mental illness, it took more than 35 years until I was able to feel that the impact of my experience was fully understood by another human being. Stigma and discrimination kept me silent, the price of which was realized by me personally in terms of depression and anxiety – I experienced years of panic attacks without realizing what was going on despite working in the system – and by the State of CT – my decimated sense of self-worth led me to underemployment and single parenthood thereby needing State support for a period of time. I can tell you that I am fully convinced that had I had access to proper supports early on, specifically information and access to fellow peer role

models, my life would have taken a far more positive path. I firmly believe my mom's life certainly would have as well had peer supports been available.

Through my work as a family advocate, a peer role that I obtained having had experience advocating for a child/youth with a behavioral health concern, my co-workers and I experience daily the benefits of connecting and engaging with families. We utilize the "Wraparound Process", a strengths-based, family-driven process. They often describe it as feeling "very different" from how they are usually treated in terms of feeling "understood" and not having to advocate for their needs alone. We focus on strengths and choice vs. deficits and force, the way ALL OF US want to be treated.

I urge the committee to pass HB 6684 and to continue to support the growth of individualized, person-centered peer supports across services. Thank you for your time.