

CONNECTICUT LEGAL RIGHTS PROJECT

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TESTIMONY OF JAN VANTASSEL, ESQ.
PUBLIC SAFETY AND SECURITY COMMITTEE
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My name is Jan VanTassel, and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc. (CLRP). CLRP is a statewide non-profit agency that provides legal services to low income adults with psychiatric disabilities on matters related to their treatment, recovery and civil rights. I am here to comment on House Bill 6162 because we believe it is overly broad.

CLRP strongly supports measures that would prevent violent and potentially violent people from owning or having access to guns. However, we are concerned when mental illness is treated as a proxy for violence. As you know, persons diagnosed with a mental illness are no more likely to be violent than other people. They are more likely to be the victims of crimes.

In addition, the Connecticut commitment statutes do not limit commitment to persons who are a danger to themselves or others. They also allow the involuntary commitment of people who are determined to be "gravely disabled" meaning that they are unable to provide for their basic needs. This has no relationship to dangerousness or a propensity for violence.

Furthermore, CLRP routinely represents clients who are subject to a Physician's Emergency Certificate (PEC) who are released following an evaluation because they do not meet commitment standards. Other clients pursue a voluntary commitment because they are having problems with medications that they are taking as prescribed, but are causing side effects and need to be adjusted. These persons do not have a history of violence nor have they been found dangerous, but would be subject to the restrictions in HB 6162.

Conversely, it is my reading of the statutes that persons subject to a restraining order because of threatened use or attempted use of physical force against another person have their rights restricted only while the order is in place, with no look back period whatsoever.

This focus on diagnosis rather than behavior is stigmatizing, simplistic and illogical. I urge this committee to focus restrictions on persons who lack the capacity to handle guns safely, as well as persons who have a history of violent behavior, including actions such as harming pets. This may well include persons with serious and persistent mental illness, but certainly not all of them, and it definitely extends well beyond persons with this diagnosis.

I ask that you amend the bill to be consistent with these standards.