

Catherine D. Ludlum
46 St. James Street, Unit 16
Manchester, CT 06040-5982

860-649-7110
cathyludlum@cox.net

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE
AN ACT CONCERNING INVOLUNTARY SHOCK THERAPY
HOUSE BILL 5298
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Ladies and gentlemen of the Public Health Committee, good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about this very important piece of legislation.

My name is Cathy Ludlum, and I am a member of Second Thoughts Connecticut. We are a grassroots organization opposed to the legalization of assisted suicide. We believe in having a balanced social policy that discourages people from suicide but does not subject them to forced treatment.

I have been working in the disability field for more than 25 years. During that time, I have learned so much about the issues affecting the different populations that make up the disability rights movement in Connecticut and nationally. One thing we must always do is support the rights of our brothers and sisters whose situations may be different from our own, but whose struggles and dreams are the same.

It is in this vein that I am here to express strong support for HB 5298, An Act Concerning Involuntary Shock Therapy. It seems like common sense that such a life-altering procedure should *only* be done with the *fully informed and uncoerced consent of the individual*. Alas, Connecticut is one of the states where a probate decision overrides freedom of choice regarding treatment options up to and including electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). This legislation would go a long way toward ensuring that people have the right to refuse—or to accept—ECT.

Disability rights advocates, local disability organizations, and national disability groups have gone on record as supporting individual choice by opposing forced psychiatric treatment. One example is the National Council on Disability (NCD), an independent federal agency appointed by the President. NCD's role is to study the array of issues affecting people with all kinds of disabilities, and to advise the government on policies that are working as well as those that are not.

In 2000, NCD issued a report called "From Privileges to Rights: People Labeled with Psychiatric Disabilities Speak for Themselves." The report was based on testimony from a public hearing held in Albany, NY in 1998. This hearing was unique in that people with firsthand experience of the psychiatric system were the key presenters, and their advice was taken seriously. The resulting recommendations came directly from the comments of the people who testified.

While many issues were identified, there was one overwhelming theme. According to the report, "The foremost change that is needed, as referred to by speaker after speaker, is the elimination of coercion from the provision of mental health services. Involuntary commitment and forced treatment, which often go unquestioned in discussions of mental health policy, were described again and again as being among the most painful and difficult experiences of people's lives."

This speaks to the disability imperative of Nothing About Us Without Us. No decision fundamentally affecting someone's life should ever be made without him or her at the table. This is not only true of people with disabilities, of course; but like other oppressed groups, we have had to fight to get a place at what should be our own table.

You will be hearing from others who are better acquainted with this issue than I am, although I too spent a few days in a locked ward at a psychiatric facility. Truly, it can happen to anyone.

By passing HB 5298, Connecticut would be a leader in recognizing the rights of people with psychiatric labels.

In conclusion, let me leave you with another important thought from the NCD report: "All the recommendations in this report emphasize the basic principle that people with psychiatric disabilities are, first and foremost, citizens who have the right to expect that they will be treated according to the principles of law that apply to all other citizens. All laws and policies that restrict the rights of people with psychiatric disabilities simply because of their disabilities are inharmonious with basic principles of law and justice, as well as with such landmark civil rights laws as the Americans with Disabilities Act."

Thank you.

Source:

"From Privileges to Rights: People Labeled with Psychiatric Disabilities Speak for Themselves."
National Council on Disability. 2000. <http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2000/Jan202000#ack>