**STATE OF CONNECTICUT**
**OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE**
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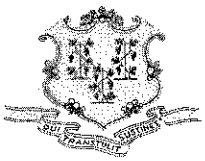

**Sarah Healy Eagan**
**Acting Child Advocate**

# TESTIMONY OF SARAH EAGAN, ACTING CHILD ADVOCATE FOR THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT, REGARDING THE BUDGET FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES
**February 18, 2014**

Good afternoon, Representative Walker, Senator Bye, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, and distinguished members of the committee. I am Sarah Eagan, the Acting Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut and I am submitting this testimony regarding the budget appropriated for Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. I was appointed to this position in August 2013 by Governor Malloy and began my term on September 9, 2013.

The Office of the Child Advocate responds to citizens' calls for help regarding children, often children with disabilities or those who have been victims of abuse or neglect; reports regarding unexplained and unexpected child fatalities; reviews child-serving systems strengths and gaps and partners with stakeholders to develop and implement recommendations for change.

Governor Malloy and this Legislature have worked hard to ensure the maintenance of the social safety net for vulnerable adults, persons with disabilities and their families during these trying fiscal times. There is no question regarding the commitment of our Governor and lawmakers to improving access to mental health care for children and adults, including breaking down stigma associated with seeking help.

As we redesign healthcare to improve effectiveness, increase access and reduce long-term costs, the Office of the Child Advocate would like to highlight important themes regarding the appropriated budget for the Department of Mental Health and Addition Services.

**Housing Assistance**
OCA supports the Governor's proposed addition of 110 units of supportive housing, including additional support for our Rental Assistance Program (RAP) vouchers, for persons with psychiatric disabilities. Access to affordable and supportive housing is a critical component of our continuum of prevention and treatment for persons with mental health challenges.

**No More Stigma**
OCA supports the Governor's effort to de-stigmatize seeking mental health care. It is essential that we support all efforts to make seeking help a routine part of our healthcare continuum. DMHAS has identified stigma and discrimination as barriers to services, including substance abuse treatment, behavioral health services and suicide prevention resources. FFY 2014-2015 Community Mental Health Services and Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant State Plan and Application (hereinafter BG-App.), pp. 105, 257.

**Young Adult Services**
DMHAS expends tremendous effort and expertise in its work to successfully outreach and engage with psychiatrically disabled young adults. As we move to strengthen our mental health system, a natural point of expansion is the DMHAS Young Adult Service Program (YAS). As DMHAS states in the state's Mental Health and Substance Abuse Block Grant Application draft for fiscal years 2014-15, "[e]arly intervention with young adults experiencing behavioral health problems can reduce the likelihood of future disability, increase the potential for productive adulthood, and avoid life long service costs and other adverse consequences." pg. 37. DMHAS also noted that a survey of its services confirms that "availability of services for this population as reported by all regions is limited." Id. pg. 82. Young adults also lack resources for independent living, life skills, vocational skills, supportive housing. Id.

There are unfortunately only a small percentage of vulnerable young adults who are able to be served by the YAS program. Strengthening the ability of YAS to provide support, treatment and case management for struggling young adults, will be an essential component of increasing the effectiveness of our mental health service continuum.

We thank the Governor and this Legislature for continuing to be vocal and make investments in our mental health system for children, adults and families. The Office of the Child Advocate applauds state efforts to ensure that Connecticut continues to lead innovative efforts and investment in mental health care.

Sincerely,

Sarah Eagan
Acting Child Advocate
Office of the Child Advocate