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**TESTIMONY OF JAN VANTASSEL, ESQ
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CT LEGAL RIGHTS PROJECT, INC
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
MARCH 6, 2015**

OPPOSE \$450,000 (WITH RESCISSION) CUT TO DMHAS LEGAL SERVICES (CLRP) LINE ITEM

OPPOSE \$548,000 CUT TO REGIONAL MENTAL HEALTH BOARDS

OPPOSE DPH CUTS TO SCHOOL BASED HEALTH CENTERS

Good evening. My name is Jan VanTassel and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP), a statewide non-profit agency that provides legal services to low income adults with serious mental health conditions. CLRP was established in 1990 pursuant to a Consent Order which mandated that the state provide funding for CLRP to protect the civil rights of DMHAS clients who were hospitalized, as well as those in the community to the extent resources permitted. I am testifying tonight in opposition to the \$450,000 (counting the \$50,000 rescission) cut the Governor has made in the DMHAS legal services line item that funds CLRP. This cut will eliminate CLRP's housing advocacy as well as force deep layoffs that will reduce staffing by nearly 50% and debilitate our capacity to represent clients on other civil rights matters. In fact, we have already been forced to reduce intake, and deny services to 53 individuals with housing issues as a result of the Governor's \$50,000 rescission.

Following the closure of Fairfield Hills Hospital in 1994, DMHAS contracted with CLRP to represent clients discharged from the hospital on housing related matters, because their clients were experiencing housing discrimination in the community. **DMHAS recognized that housing stability was essential** for their clients to sustain recovery in the community, and they understood that the State would spend far more for the homelessness and hospitalizations and possible incarcerations that were likely to result if their clients lost their housing. For ten years CLRP supplemented those state funds with a grant from a private foundation that allowed us to expand out housing advocacy statewide. When that grant expired in 2012, the state appropriated funds to continue CLRP's legal advocacy protecting the housing

rights of DMHAS clients. By that time several studies had demonstrated that affordable, stable housing with flexible services reduces state hospital expenditures for emergency room and inpatient stays by 71%. Ironically, the Governor has proposed increases in housing opportunities for DMHAS clients, which are certainly needed, at the same time he has eliminated their access to legal assistance.

The cost-effectiveness of CLRP's housing advocacy is not subject to debate. **In the last fiscal year CLRP represented 549 clients on housing matters, and all of those clients had housing or access to housing (usually a subsidy waiting list) when the case was closed.** CLRP's average cost per housing case is \$806, while the cost of one emergency room visit is \$2152, and the cost of one day in the hospital is more than \$1000 per day. With expenditures such as these, the state will easily spend more than the \$450,000 allegedly being saved if only sixty of CLRP's 549 clients lose their housing because they do not have an attorney to represent them. And that is assuming one ER visit and five days in the hospital, which are conservative estimates. There may also be potential costs incurred by the criminal justice system. The other legal services programs already turn away clients because they cannot meet the demand, and frequently refer "difficult" clients with serious mental health conditions to CLRP because of our expertise. The bottom line is that this cut, like so many in this budget, makes no sense...either in its human impact or the fiscal impact. I'd call it smoke and mirrors, but there really isn't a lot of smoke. There is simply a whole lot of pain.

Like the services provided for the state by so many non-profit agencies, CLRP's are a bargain. Unfortunately, this is partially because the state does not provide non-profit agencies with cost of living adjustments, and salaries are substantially lower than those of comparable state employees. For example, the starting salary for a CLRP staff attorney is more than \$3000 less than that of a Human Services Advocate at a state agency, and the starting salary for state agency staff attorneys is more than \$20,000 higher than a CLRP staff attorney. The gap is even higher for attorneys working with the Public Defenders and the Attorney General's office. Of course, these differentials are considerably more when the value of benefits is factored into the calculation. I present these figures not to criticize the salaries and benefits that state employees receive, but to make it absolutely clear to you that **the legal services provided by CLRP's and other legal services programs represent an exceptional value to the State.** The relatively small amount of funds that you invest in CLRP yield a substantial dividend for the State both in terms of the individuals who are helped and the expenditures that are avoided.

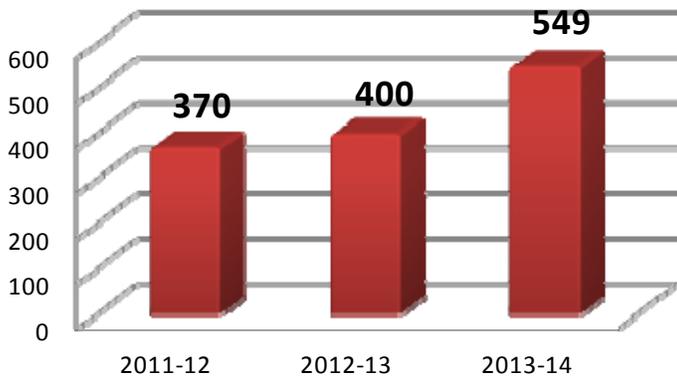
As I stated at the outset, this \$450,000 cut will severely damage CLRP's capacity to represent DMHAS clients on other issues as well. **A funding cut of \$450,000 will force layoffs of roughly half of our legal advocacy staff.** These attorneys

and paralegal advocates are assigned to facilities and communities throughout the state. For the most part, they are not dedicated to particular types of clients or cases. The same legal advocates who represent clients on housing cases will also represent clients on education and employment discrimination, advance directives or treatment rights. Therefore, when an attorney or paralegal advocate is laid off, we lose not just the capacity to handle housing cases, we are also unable to handle as many of those other cases, because we simply do not have enough staff to do them. In short, **we simply will not have enough staff to maintain our current scope of other services because the operational structure of the program will be destroyed.**

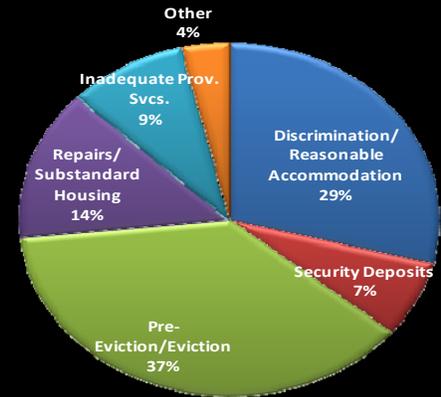
I also want to express my strong opposition to the elimination of the regional mental health boards. Many of you are no doubt already familiar with the range of education, assessment, and outreach services that these agencies provide. With very limited funding and staff, they provide a truly remarkable range of services to the cities and towns and individuals that they serve. Most recently they have held “community conversations” throughout the state to engage persons in their region in a dialogue about mental health conditions and services. They have taken a lead role in addressing the misunderstanding and discrimination (often called stigma) that the Governor, the Sandy Hook Commission, the Children’s Mental Health Task Force, the Young Adult Task Force, and for that matter, the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission Report issued in 2000 have all specifically identified as creating barriers to treatment and community integration. The conversations and interactions that they promote are far more effective than billboards and the state cannot afford to lose these valuable agencies.

Finally, I oppose the DPH budget cuts in school based health centers. The enhancement of health services at schools has been identified by the Sandy Hook Commission and other task forces as one concrete step the state can take to identify and address behavioral health issues in children and youth. In addition, these centers have been shown to improve academic achievement. This line item should be increased not cut.

The Housing Caseload Rose 48% in Two Years

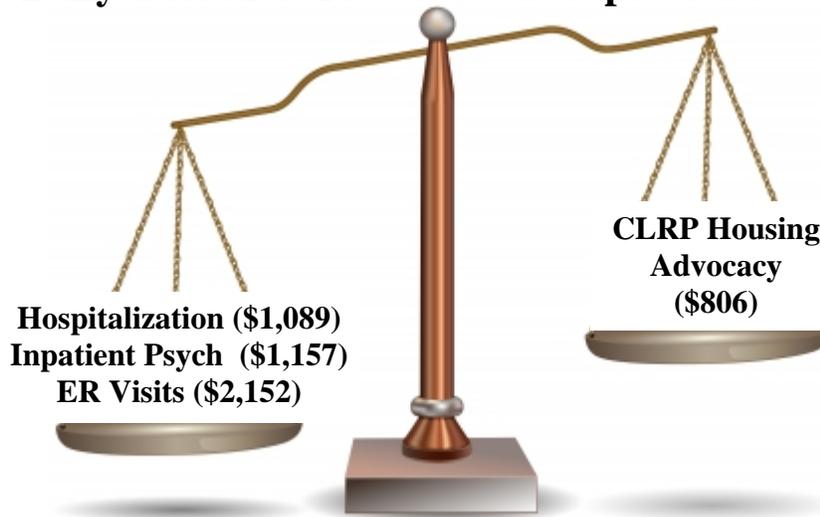


Housing Cases are 40% of CLRP's Caseload



Daily Cost of Care

Cost per Case



"We with disabilities either physical or mental are reassured knowing that we have the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc. behind us. Thank you." A.K. and J.M.



"I was very frightened with my Section 8 challenge. And I was also scared because this type of serious stress can/does bring on psychiatric consequences. The wonderful way I was treated helped lessen my fears...It is that special care and the understanding of how this affect one like me (bipolar) that make CLRP so wonderful. I am very grateful. Thank you" – C.K.



"I want to thank CLRP for the supportive and speedy way they handled my case. I am so grateful that CLRP exists. It made all the difference for me. Without this free service, I would not have had the courage to stand up to the housing authority. Thanks to CLRP I am no longer homeless. J.D.F.

