

March 6, 2015

State of Connecticut – Appropriations Committee

Re: H.B. No. 6824: An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30th, 2017.

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Russell Hassmann and my brother Don has suffered from mental illness all of his life.

As a teenager, my parents wanted to make a difference and decided to become foster parents. After caring for several children, we were blessed to take Don into our home and family when he was eight weeks old.

His first eight weeks of life were very difficult, clinging onto life due to lack of care from his mother and he almost passed away twice. The State placed him in our care, into a loving family and an environment where he could be nurtured and cared for.

Eventually, we were able to adopt Don and we welcomed him as a son and brother.

As Don entered school, he began having problems interacting socially and keeping up with the other students in his class. His diagnosis was border line intellectual function coupled with severe ADHD. Our family worked with a social worker and school to work with Don and provide specialized instruction for Don in the school environment.

As a teenager, Don's mental illness became more evident and we struggled to manage his violent outbursts at home and at school. In his late teens, his violent behavior increased which eventually led to Don striking our father in the head with a metal bar. Our family struggled to find treatment options for Don and quickly learned about the lack of resources for families with a loved one suffering with mental illness.

Through his twenties and thirties, Don lived in group homes, rest homes, private pay treatment programs and now at age 38, he is currently a client of Gilead Community Services in Middletown.

The care that Gilead provides to my brother has resulted in an amazing transformation. In his early thirties, he made regular trips to the emergency room for suicidal treatment as well as his violent behavior. Under Gilead's care, he has not been to the hospital in years and he has learned independent living skills with the hope of living on his own one day.

In October 2014, I joined the Board of Directors of Gilead to use my experience as a family member of a loved one with mental illness to help other families struggling with the same challenges that I have had and to be a champion for mental illness.

The proposed cuts to the DMHAS budget in the next budget cycle are of great concern to the effort to provide services for families struggling with mental illness. The availability of resources to assist families in coping with mental illness are already lacking and further cuts to those resources would have catastrophic consequences on the most vulnerable members of our society. We should be focusing our efforts on creating more opportunities to provide services for people suffering with mental illness not reducing services.

On behalf of Don, the 600 clients of Gilead and all families struggling with mental illness, raise your voice and oppose cuts in DMHAS funding and support the members of our society that can't speak for themselves.

Respectfully submitted,

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