Mental Health Association of Connecticut, Inc.

Donald A. Neel
Board Chair

Luis B. Perez, LCSW
President & CEO

Testimony of the Mental Health Association of Connecticut (MHAC)

Before the Housing Committee

February 3, 2015

Regarding

S.B. No. 170 (Proposed): An Act Protecting Housing For Senior Citizens

S.B. No. 409 (Proposed): An Act Expanding Age-Restricted Housing Options For Elderly Persons

H.B. No. 5583 (Proposed): An Act Concerning Housing For Elderly Persons

H.B. No. 6144 (Proposed): An Act Concerning Age-Restricted Housing Options For Elderly Persons

S.B. No. 408 (Proposed): An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness

Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and distinguished members of the Housing Committee, I am Luis Perez, President and CEO of the Mental Health Association of Connecticut. As a statewide advocacy organization and direct service provider, the Mental Health Association of Connecticut assists people with mental illnesses and co-occurring disorders, including older adults, live integrated, healthy lives in our communities. To this end, I am here today to oppose S.B. No. 170, S.B. No. 409, H.B. No. 5583, and H.B. No. 6144.

Affordable housing is a cornerstone of recovery for the people we serve. Without housing, people cannot focus on their health and wellness. Rather, all of their efforts are focused on meeting their most basic needs, including securing shelter. We are reminded of the importance of housing for the people we serve every day. With their housing and basic needs met, they are able to engage in recovery, further their education, participate in the work force, and establish relationships that promote health, wellness and integration in their communities.

61 South Main Street, Suite 100, West Hartford, CT 06107 * 860-529-1970 * fax 860-529-6833 * www.mhact.org

An example of the importance of housing comes from one of our clients who I will call Jim. Jim has a mental illness and lived with his mother until she passed away. With his mother gone, Jim did not know where he would live or how he would care for himself.

Jim moved into our supervised apartments where he learned the necessary life skills to live independently. With the availability of state-subsidized housing, Jim transitioned into an apartment in the community living independently for the first time in his life – he was nearly 40 years old.

Today, Jim continues to live independently in the community, he has been employed by The Home Depot for nearly 10 years and has been awarded The Home Depot Homer Award eight times. He enjoys a happy and fulfilling life which would not be possible without access to affordable housing. Like Jim, there are thousands of people in need of subsidized housing in order to lead meaningful and productive lives in our communities.

To this end, the Mental Health Association of Connecticut cannot support legislation that would restrict access to housing for people with disabilities. Currently, "elderly" housing is available to individuals age 62 and older who need financial housing assistance or people who have been certified as totally disabled by a federal board or agency. While we understand there is an overall shortage of affordable housing to meet the need, we cannot support S.B. No. 170, S.B. No. 409, H.B. No. 5583, or H.B. No. 6144, which would minimize access to affordable housing for people with disabilities.

We would, however, like to extend our support for S.B. No. 408: An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness. Eliminating youth homelessness in Connecticut should be a priority of the state, and we are in full support of the development of a plan by January 2016 to ameliorate youth homelessness.

I recently learned of a high school girl, who I'll call Kimberly, living in a suburban town of Hartford. Her father was in prison and her mother, who abused drugs, had abandoned her. She was left with no home and was expected to care for herself. With all of her struggles, Kimberly continued to attend high school and would stay with friends to avoid living on the streets. After learning of her situation and struggles, a teacher took Kimberly in her home and, with the help of the community, she received the supports she needed to succeed. Kimberly has since been accepted into a prestigious New England university and her future is bright.

Homeless youth are at a far higher risk than their housed peers to experience substance use issues, poor health, and unemployment. The negative effects of experiencing homelessness as a young person can last a lifetime and result in homelessness as an adult. To ensure more homeless youth like Kimberly have the opportunity to achieve success, we are in full support of S.B. No. 408.

Thank you. I sincerely appreciate your time and consideration.

61 South Main Street, Suite 100, West Hartford, CT 06107 * 860-529-1970 * fax 860-529-6833 * www.mhact.org