

Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, Inc.

The citizen's voice in mental health policy.

Testimony of Jennifer Gross, Executive Director, Concerning:

**Proposed S.B. No. 170 An Act Protecting Housing For Senior Citizens
Proposed S.B. No. 409 An Act Expanding Age-Restricted Housing Options For Elderly Persons
Proposed H.B. No. 5583 An Act Concerning Housing For Elderly Persons
Proposed H.B. No. 6144 An Act Concerning Age-Restricted Housing Options For Elderly Persons
Proposed SB 408 An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness**

February 3, 2015

Good afternoon, Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee. My name is Jennifer Gross, and I am a resident of Ledyard, Connecticut. I am also the Executive Director of the Eastern Regional Mental Health Board (ERMHB) in Norwich, Connecticut.

The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board has a statutory mandate to evaluate state-funded mental health programs for adults, assess strengths and unmet needs, and make recommendations for improvements to the Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. We serve the 39 towns in Eastern Connecticut (most of New London County, part of Tolland County, and all of Windham County), and are required to include representation from each of those towns, providing local citizens with a means for communicating their concerns directly to the highest levels of state government.

We are a grassroots-style organization in the truest sense of the word, by virtue of our membership structure, which includes all stakeholders in the mental health community. The membership of our four Catchment Area Councils (CACs), the most basic level for citizen involvement, includes those with lived experience of mental health issues, from young adults to senior citizens; their family members; provider representatives; and concerned citizens. At our monthly CAC meetings, we receive reports of service barriers and other concerns, and among the most recurrent themes is the severe lack of safe and affordable housing in Eastern Connecticut.

The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board opposes the proposed bills SB 170, SB 409, HB 5583, HB 6144, and any legislation that would ultimately restrict the right of people with disabilities to live in housing originally intended for them to share with senior citizens since 1961.

It is wrong to discriminate against anyone on the basis of irrelevant characteristics beyond someone's control, including age and diagnosis. It is appropriate to regulate disruptive or dangerous behavior, which is a completely separate issue.

At our regular monthly meetings, people with mental health concerns share the same fears that you likely hear about from seniors. Their first fear is that they will be forced out of their apartments and will not be able to find anything they can afford with their Social Security checks. Their second fear is that the

criminals who hang around selling drugs or waiting for vulnerable residents will victimize them. Third, they fear harassment because of their disability.

The vast majority of both seniors and people with disabilities are good neighbors, and have lived in public housing for years without incident. People do not stop swearing, drinking, or staying up late as soon as they become seniors. Indeed, the behavioral problems associated with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are at least as disruptive and no more tolerable because the person is older. Yet senior housing programs and nursing homes are learning to deal with these behaviors.

Everyone should be assessed and planned for individually, whether in the general community, in specialized housing, or in nursing homes. Good community agencies and good facilities do this as a matter of course. Professionals try to match individual needs with program resources under the assumption that there is an appropriate place for everyone. If that is not the case, then it is our responsibility to make it so. If problems arise, we should look for the source, not blame someone put in the wrong place by circumstance or manipulation. That is scapegoating.

Elderly and disabled housing programs already have behavioral standards for residents. Dangerous, disruptive, and predatory behavior is against the rules and people who cannot conform must leave. Enforcing these rules and educating older residents about the problems of both older and younger disabled people is a better way to protect the rights of all who need these programs.

Excluding people with disabilities from housing opportunities will not protect the elderly from abuse or victimization. It is an illusion of a solution that gives legal sanction to prejudice, and adds immeasurably to the burden of disability.

The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board supports Proposed SB 408, An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness. Although there is a wealth of anecdotal information, in Eastern Connecticut, as throughout the state, the extent of youth homelessness is not fully understood, due to the number of young people who are "couch-surfing" at a friend's home, or moving around from place to place in order to stay off the streets. Many are fleeing an untenable family situation, were forced out or rejected by family, have been in and out of state programs for most of their lives, or simply don't know they are eligible for the limited patchwork of programs that exists.

These youth are at a higher risk for dropping out of school early, have poor prospects for educational and employment opportunities, and are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system or to engage in prostitution in order to survive. They are also at a higher risk for assault, rape, or other victimization, and are more likely to develop HIV/AIDS, depression, suicide attempts, mental health and substance abuse disorders.

Far too many young people are falling through the cracks. Connecticut needs a coordinated plan for assessing the youth homelessness problem in our state and for responding to the crisis. Early intervention will limit the need for more expensive services down the road, and offer better quality of life for young people in Connecticut.

Thank you for your consideration.