

Dear members of the Planning & Development Committee:

As the Executive Director of the Southwest Regional Mental Health Board, based in Norwalk and serving southwestern CT, I strongly urge you to vote against SB203, An Act Concerning Community Residences.

We discussed this proposal at our Catchment Area Council 3&4 meeting last week, which is a group of mental health consumers, providers, concerned citizens, and appointed town representatives from the Greater Bridgeport area. Our entire group was very concerned about this very stigmatizing bill, so I speak on their behalf as well as my own.

This bill is based on discrimination toward individuals with severe mental illness. In requiring DMHAS to provide towns with prior notice about the establishment of any small group homes, it would circumvent privacy laws protecting people's psychiatric and medical histories and would essentially undo existing legislation that allows these small residences to exist as long as they comply with all regulations that apply to a typical family residence.

Discrimination against people with mental illness is prevalent; one of the side effects is that it causes people not to seek treatment. This bill would virtually ensure discrimination, since it would (a) treat people with mental illness differently from others who rent or purchase a home; (b) bring these individuals' existence to the attention of the community as though they merit special concern, despite HIPAA privacy laws; and (c) would probably result in "Not In My Back Yard" responses from the local community whenever anyone attempted to establish a group home.

Each of you has most likely had someone in your family or among your close friends who has required some type of psychiatric treatment in their lives. If they were in treatment and needed a safe place to stay while receiving therapy and support, and had been evaluated as fit to live in the community rather than a hospital setting, wouldn't you want them to be able to live a more typical life in a supervised community residence?

Please do not support this bill. Rather than discriminate against people with severe mental illness, I urge you to support funding for the mental health system which serves the needs of this population.

Thank you,
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