

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE  
GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

March 6 2015

Heather Smith-Jackson, Newington CT

Good afternoon Senator Bye and Representative Walker and members of the committee:

My name is Heather Smith-Jackson and I am a current voter in the town of Newington. I am here to testify at this public hearing on behalf of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. I am opposed to the proposed budget cuts to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. As a graduate student at Smith College School of Social Work, my morals of the profession have compelled me to advocate for the citizens of the State of Connecticut. These citizens that have been labeled with a diagnosis, these citizens who have been discriminated against and these citizens who work every day to empower these individuals.

The proposed budget cuts of \$585,000 dollars will not only come to eliminate the Regional Mental Health Boards, but will also eliminate the voices of those with mental illness, the voices of those with addiction and those who attentively listen to create change in the State of Connecticut. Although, I have only been in the field for five years, I have realized the importance of two things while working with clients; listening and advocacy. While interning in the Young Adult Services, within the Institute of Living, I listened to a client talk about his psychosis. Taking the time to truly listen allowed me to begin to understand the torment he endured every day. It wasn't until I truly listened, did I hear the story and how it felt to be an addict. This not only changed how I proceeded as a professional, but my clients' perceptions of being alone, being unheard, changed.

The importance of listening and advocacy are driving forces of the Regional Mental Health Boards. Every day volunteers and professionals of these boards, that will soon come to be eliminated, hear the voices of Connecticut that create that change. The Regional Mental Health Boards are a bridge from a single individual to a macro movement that encourages the development of services and reviews systematic flaws. They are essential to responding to the needs of Connecticut. This is just as imperative as a medic responding to a drowning victim. Without a reaction to a catalyst, the victim will inevitably drown. But this isn't a metaphorical victim; these are real people, diagnosed with mental illnesses and addiction.

The elimination of the Regional Mental Health Boards will dismally reinforce what society has constructed as a dichotomy of "us" and "them"; a reflection of what it means today to be right or wrong in this world. We, as a State, will cease to hear these voices, and therefore lack the experience to justify these decisions. Today, I come to speak not as a separate professional, but as an individual to reinforce the importance of not only being heard but listened to.