

**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee on the Governor's Proposed
Biennial Budget**

Public Hearing Date: March 6, 2015

Submitted By: Robert C. Lambert, MA, LADC, President/Executive Director,
Connecticut Counseling Centers, Inc.

Re: Proposed cuts to Regional Mental Health Boards

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Robert Lambert and I am writing in opposition to the proposed cuts to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. In particular, I urge you to continue funding the Regional Mental Health Boards (RMHBs).

The proposed cut of \$584,000 to the 5 RMHBs represents approximately 75% of their funding and would effectively close down the entire RMHB system. This would mean an end to grassroots needs assessment, community-based evaluations, regional coalition building, and representation of the community's voice at the state level.

As a member of the Board of Directors of Southwest Regional Mental Health Board (SWRMHB), I have seen the great value provided by the RMHB system.

SWRMHB provides outreach and education, fights stigma, brings together a wide range of community members and organizations, and brings our region's needs straight to the Commissioner of Mental Health and Addiction Services. It is the only organization representing consumers, family members, and providers of behavioral health services. It is the only organization ensuring the community's voice in oversight and evaluation of programs and services. We cannot afford to eliminate these vital functions.

Furthermore, if the Boards are eliminated, the state may save \$584,000 but it risks losing \$23,000,000 in federal funding, since the mental health and substance abuse block grants depend on the regional information collected by the RMHBs and the Regional Action Councils and on their participation in the State Planning Council.

On a local level, with only one full-time staff member, SWRMHB works tirelessly to connect people and programs in order to meet needs and improve services. A partial list of accomplishments over the past year easily demonstrates the value of the state's \$121,202 investment in SWRMHB:

- SWRMHB's Mental Wellness Month initiative reached 2400 people during October and provided referrals to 312 people in need.
- SWRMHB's Community Conversations on Mental Health engaged more than 200 community members in six hours of small-group conversations, consensus building, and action planning around mental health.
- SWRMHB coordinated 53 awareness-raising, training, and other activities during a single 30-day period for Mental Health Awareness Month.
- SWRMHB managed a project to develop and promote TurningPointCT.org, a website to support teens and young adults (a high-risk group) in the search for mental wellness.
- SWRMHB is currently conducting a study to determine the barriers affecting consumer access to outpatient behavioral health services, particularly access to prescribers. This study follows up on the needs identified in the regional needs assessment and the Community Conversations on Mental Health.

Following the tragic Sandy hook event, there was an outcry from the public and a call by public officials for changes in the mental health system. A task force was organized which released a report that called for more coordination and oversight within the mental health system and the dedication of more resources. The report generated hope that positive changes would be made. The proposed cuts would move the system in the opposite direction. Frankly, this is not the time to cut financial resources to the mental health system and eliminate the regional mental health boards.

Thank you for understanding the value of these critical functions in support of the mental health system. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, or for additional information.

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