

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

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Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker: Leaders Cane, Ziobron and Porter; and Fairfield County members of the Appropriations Committee, Baker, Rosario, Santiago, McCarthy Vahey, Wilms, LaVielle, Miller, and McGorty.

I am opposed to the proposed cuts to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) because connections within Regional Mental Health Boards play a vital role in every aspect of what we do. ***Many of you pledged your support to the LGBTQ community, please keep your pledge by finding cuts elsewhere in the state budget.***

My name is Jacki Alessio, MSW and I am here to testify on the Governor's Proposed Biennial Budget as the Service Coordinator & Case Manager of the Triangle Community Center (TCC). Since 1990, our organization's 25-year presence has managed without public funding. Only within the last two years have we made the shift from an entirely volunteer run organization to now comprising our three fulltime paid staff: TCC's Executive Director Anthony Crisci, Programs Coordinator Conor Pfeifer and myself as our Social Worker.

The Triangle Community Center (TCC) is Fairfield County's leading provider of LGBTQ resources and programming. TCC is also the only organization focused exclusively on the LGBTQ community in Fairfield County, which is a community at much greater risk of isolation, discrimination, suicide, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS than its peers. Our most sought after adult support programs include:

“Finding my Freedom” (Adult Survivors of Child Abuse), the Triangle Transgender Society, Questioning & Coming Out, AA, Al Alon, and Steps into Recovery. TCC’s outstanding youth programming includes OUTSpoken and the Transgender/Gender Questioning Youth Forum. New Spring 2015 programming will directly address the need for Bereavement services as well as Self Harm and Suicide Prevention education.

TCC has been in direct contact with Executive Director Margaret Watt since December of 2014, who invited me as our in-house social worker to the Catchment Area Council Meeting in Stamford (Feb 5) to discuss peer mental health support programs. Since this *connection between TCC and SWRMHB* was made, our list of possible referrals available for our clients has grown exponentially.

Our LGBTQ youth are particularly vulnerable during episodes of homelessness. In fact, TCC has been consulted to participate in the Point and Time Count through the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. Once **homeless**, LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of *physical and sexual assault* and higher incidence of mental health problems and unsafe sexual behaviors than heterosexual homeless youth. This is why we our Case Management systems works hand and hand with agencies like Greenwich’s Kids in Crisis and Bridgeport’s Center for Family Justice. LGBT homeless youth are twice as likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) as their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent).<sup>3</sup> TCC’s youth-focused programming functions as peer support, but because we are able to refer them to SWRMHB, they have access to services and resources to address the often life-threatening mental health problems that disproportionately impact the LGBTQ community.<sup>1</sup>

There’s tragically a sizeable amount of substance use within our Transgender community. 45-74% of Transgender men who take testosterone increase their risk of heart with *tobacco* use. *Marijuana, crack cocaine*, and *alcohol* are most commonly used. *Methamphetamine* use ranges from 4-46%, and 2-40%

have experimented with *injection drugs*.<sup>4</sup>

The myriad of unique stressors LGBT-identified people experience, such as coming out and harassment in schools or the workplace, can impact levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse - all of which are common co-occurring conditions and can be contributing factors in the development of an eating disorder. **Eating disorders** among LGBT populations should be understood within the broader cultural context of oppression.<sup>1</sup>

***Injury and Violence*** (Violence against transgender women, especially women of color, continues in the US. 16-60% of transgender persons are victims of physical assault or abuse & 13-66% are victims of sexual assault).<sup>4</sup>

Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, “mostly heterosexuals,” and heterosexuals who have ever had a same-sex sex partner were found to be one-and-a-half to two times as likely to experience violent events, especially in childhood, than the general population and have double the risk of experiencing **PTSD** as a consequence.<sup>2</sup>

Paying attention to our aging LGBTQ members, we take into consideration that 40% are not forthcoming with their primary care providers in telling their circumstances and lifestyles. In comparison to non-LGBT people 1 in 5, 1 in 3 of our older adults live alone.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, TCC is reaching out to Fairfield County senior service providers and presenting on the benefits of “Coming Out”. We know that a once scared, confused, vulnerable and lonely older person can feel relieved, proud, empowered, affirmed and exhilarated once given the opportunity to express who they really are.

In conclusion, TCC is often a first stop for LGBTQ individuals and families reluctant to seek services for mental health and substance use problems, and we are indebted to SWRMHB for providing referrals and support for all who come to TCC for help.

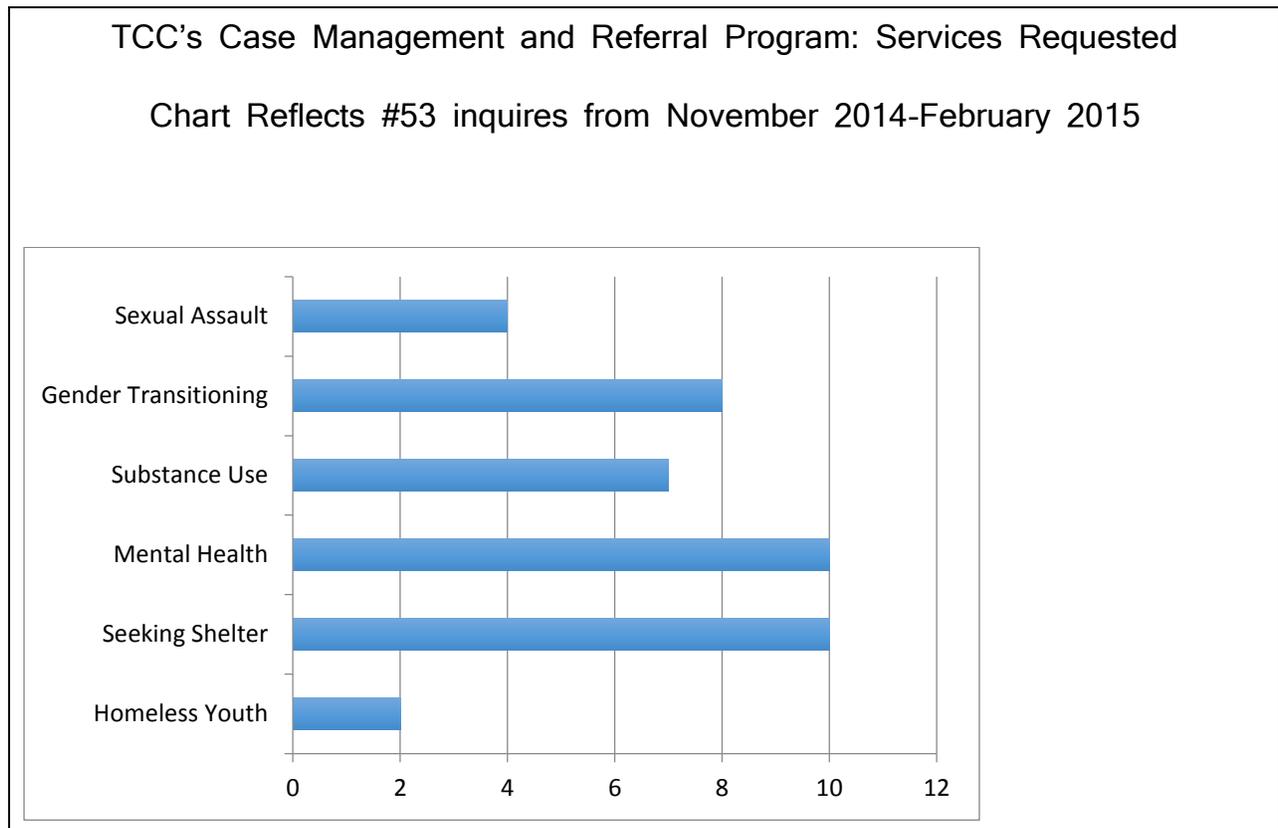
<sup>1</sup>National Eating Disorders (NEDA). “Eating Disorders in LGBT Population”.

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Gazette. “Higher risk of PTSD for gay, lesbian, bisexual, ‘mostly heterosexual’ youth”. June 19, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health: LGBT Youth”.

<sup>4</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA). “Top Health Issues for LGBT Populations Information & Resource Kit”.

<sup>5</sup> Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders (SAGE). “Out & Visible: The Experiences and Attitudes of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Older Adults, Ages 45-75”



We are deeply concerned these cuts will burden the LGBTQ community by denying access to live-saving services.

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