

CONNECTICUT LEGAL RIGHTS PROJECT, INC.

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Testimony for Appropriations Committee Public Hearing March 6, 2015

REGARDING THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED BIENNIAL BUDGET
Against: cuts to the DMHAS and DPH budgets
For: investments in supportive housing

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

My name is Kathy Flaherty. I live in Newington and work in the Middletown office of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP). I am the face of mental health. I am a wife, a daughter, a mother to two dogs, an aunt, a friend, and a lawyer. I also happen to be a person living with bipolar disorder. I am speaking to you tonight in my personal capacity, rather than my professional capacity, because I want to share my lived experience.

I am blessed to be the Associate Executive Director of a legal services organization that advocates for low-income individuals in institutions and in the community throughout the state who live with mental health conditions. We support initiatives that integrate individuals into the community. I would not have this job but for my experiences of living with a psychiatric diagnosis. When you look at me, I ask you to also see the faces of all the clients that CLRP serves – and, more importantly, the faces of those who we will have to turn away if the funds cut in the Governor's budget are not restored to the DMHAS Legal Services line item.

People in this state have heard bits and pieces of my story over the years but I am taking the time to tell it again tonight so that you can appreciate why the work that CLRP does is so important. I was civilly committed to McLean Hospital my first year at Harvard Law School and spent 60 days in the hospital. When I returned to school the next year, I joined the Council of Former Patients of McLean Hospital. I put that on my resume despite recommendations from the Public Interest Advising Office to do otherwise. When I interviewed for a summer

internship at one legal aid agency in Connecticut, I disclosed my experience to the attorney who interviewed me. His response – for which I will be forever grateful – was to tell me that while he would love to offer me a position, he thought I would be happier working at CLRP. He was right.

Fast forward 22 years, and a career as a staff attorney at different legal services agencies in Connecticut, and lots of time spent volunteering for mental health advocacy organizations – I was approached about a job opportunity as Associate Executive Director at CLRP. Since I had served two terms on the Board of Directors of the organization, this represented a coming home for me. To be able to serve the community of “my people” in this way has been absolutely wonderful.

I share my personal story, and have for years, because I simply cannot imagine being silent about it. I have a voice, and it’s my responsibility to use it. Silence is simply NOT an option. My diagnosis is not all of who I am, but it is an essential part of who I am – and I see no reason why I should be ashamed and hide any part of myself. The people here today who are sharing their personal stories clearly feel the same way I do. Discrimination – which is the word I suggest that we use in place of stigma, because that’s what it is – is all too real. I faced it when I applied for admission to the Connecticut bar after I answered yes to questions about mental health treatment. I was subjected to three hearings at which very intrusive questions were asked about my mental health condition. My admission was delayed for more than a year, and I was only admitted conditionally. I was required to report to the bar every six months for 9 years that I was compliant with treatment, and had to ensure that documentation from my doctor was submitted timely every six months or I would get a call from the statewide bar counsel.

The clients CLRP represents face discrimination in trying to meet their most basic needs – housing, employment, providing for themselves and their families. I think one of the reasons I have been able to maintain my recovery is that I never have had to worry about a roof over my head or food on the table – I was able to focus on regaining and maintaining my mental health. The clients CLRP serves do not have that luxury – in addition to sharing the struggle of living with a mental health condition, they live on limited incomes and often have fewer choices in where they can live.

The governor’s budget does include much-needed funding for additional units of supportive housing. However, the governor’s budget does not include any funding for the legal help that people living in that housing will need when they

experience discrimination and other problems with their housing – and I can assure you, that discrimination and other problems WILL happen, because they do every day. These funds must be restored. If they are not, we will have no choice but to lay off close to half of the very dedicated and capable attorneys and paralegal advocates who protect the rights of a very vulnerable population. It will ultimately cost the state more money when people who are unable to maintain their housing utilize more expensive hospital services. The average cost of a case at CLRP is \$806. One emergency room visit costs \$2,152. You can do the math.

The funding cuts to the regional mental health boards would eliminate them. Given the vital work they do as a liaison connecting the state to local providers and community members and helping to bring in \$23 million in federal funds to the state, this is another cut that simply “makes no cents.”

The cuts to DPH’s budget that supports school-based health centers are equally disturbing. The report given by the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission to the Governor earlier today cited schools as an important locus of providing care – to the whole student – addressing both physical and mental health needs. The report called for Connecticut to “build and support a collaborative system of care for children and families that starts with the schools.” This funding cut would prevent that work from continuing.

At CLRP, we help our clients find their voice. You are hearing it loudly and clearly tonight. My personal commitment and the commitment of the agency I represent are to advocacy that protects the legal rights of our clients. Please help us continue this work.