

Testimony before the Finance Committee

IN SUPPORT OF:

S.B. No. 1135: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A SUSTAINABLE PATH FOR MAINTAINING THE BUDGET RESERVE FUND AND REDUCING THE EFFECT OF REVENUE VOLATILITY ON THE STATE BUDGET

by Margaret Watt

On behalf of the Southwest Regional Mental Health Board

April 23, 2015

Senator Fonfara, Representative Berger, and distinguished members of the Finance Committee,

My name is Margaret Watt, resident of Norwalk, writing to you today as Executive Director of the Southwest Regional Mental Health Board (SWRMHB) in support of SB 1135 which seeks to reduce the effect of revenue volatility on our state's budget.

The Regional Mental Health Boards were designed to represent the community's voice: our Catchment Area Councils bring together consumers of mental health services, their family members, service providers, and appointed representatives of the towns we serve. It is safe to say that all of us recognize the very difficult budget situation the state faces this year, and we thank you for your efforts to balance the many needs of your constituents.

We realize that the Governor's goal of balancing the budget is important. However, it cannot be done on the backs of the most vulnerable members of our state. The original proposal would have a drastic impact on health and human services across the board.

In the area of mental health, the proposed reductions in funding would affect the ability of individuals with severe mental illness to access care, housing, and support. While these individuals' needs will not vanish, many of their essential services will. The result will be an increase in more costly services, such as hospitalizations and emergency room use, as well as increased homelessness.

Among the reductions in funding that will affect the population with mental health and substance use disorders are:

- \$107 million cut to Medicaid rates
- \$25 million cut to outpatient mental health and addiction services
- Elimination of the Statewide Gatekeeper program that provides outreach to older adults with mental health and addiction concerns—a high-need population that has been identified as one of the top priorities for coming years
- Elimination of the Connecticut Legal Rights Projects funding for housing advocacy for people with behavioral health needs
- A \$584,000 cut to the 5 Regional Mental Health Boards which represents 90% of our funding and will eliminate us—despite the fact that our needs assessments and priority planning leverage \$23 million in federal funding for mental health and addiction services. The RMHBs

further provide independent outside evaluation of the state-funded mental health system, as well as providing community education and giving community members a platform for advocacy.

Given the damage that the proposed budget would cause to our state's safety net for people with mental illness, developmental disabilities, and other vulnerable conditions, **we support efforts to increase revenue, including addressing the spending cap, and to reduce the volatility of our state budget so that maintenance of a safety net can be a priority both now and in the future.**

Thank you for your time, attention, and interest in these matters,

Sincerely,

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