

Testimony of Thomas M. Fiorentino on H.B. 5044 Before the Appropriations Committee

Submitted via email: [apptestimony@cga.ct.gov](mailto:apptestimony@cga.ct.gov)

Sen. Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about HB. 5044. My name is Tom Fiorentino. I live in West Hartford with my wife, Shelagh McClure, and our intellectually disabled adult son Dan. Per the de facto policy of the State of Connecticut- your policy- he will live with us until we have either both died or both become permanently incapacitated.

There are two parts of the bill that I would like to address, with an additional comment on the overall budget process.

First, I oppose the \$59 million cut to DDS. This cut is imposed on top of earlier, disproportionate cuts totaling \$60 million since 2012. The effect? The Waiting List for residential services has grown to over 2,000 families and we now have a new waiting list- this one for day programs.

There are places you could have cut in the DDS budget that would not have had the effect of adding to one list and creating another. But those places- wildly out of control State employee overtime and the absolutely indefensible (and exorbitant) institutions - have, with limited exceptions, gone untouched in prior years.

What did this leave to cut? The vastly more efficient- and equally capable- private providers; along with the programs that directly and most directly affect families and DDS clients.

Sadly, I have to acknowledge that history is a great predictor of the future, and that any cuts will once again fall most heavily on the programs that actually work, while sparing those that are ineffective and inefficient. Accordingly, I oppose those cuts as they are destined to further decimate what is indisputably a core government function.

This brings me to the second part of the bill, the transfer of \$537 million to DSS. It is impossible for me to support or oppose this because no information has been made available that explains anything about the transfer.

DDS is having problems that profoundly and adversely affect those with intellectual disabilities. A new way of doing business might be a good idea. But I think that at least some of you will agree with me that until you know the details- until you know, for example, whether the already unresponsive (and maddeningly uncommunicative) DSS can handle this transfer- it is hard to vote either way.

We hear that this transfer will be part of a switch to fee for service. I understand that was, overall, a positive thing, for mental health services in Connecticut.

But that change was the product of a carefully constructed plan with ample time and competent staff to smooth its implementation. Will that be true this time? Hard to know, given that no one has deigned to share any details. Is there the expertise at DDS and DSS to handle this switch? I acknowledge that there are extremely capable, thoughtful and creative thinkers at DSS, but will they have the time to take this on?

Increasing my caution and concern are reports that fee for service has been fraught with problems in other states. Will Connecticut avoid or repeat those mistakes? Again, without a plan, how would one know?

Finally, I want to express my opinion on two things about the overall budget process. The first is the idea that every agency should sustain the same percentage cut.

This is simplistic and flies in the face of the Governor's own rhetoric- rhetoric with which I agree- that in these times, we need to focus on our core governmental functions. If every agency is cut the same amount, then either they all equally carry out core governmental functions- which is preposterous- or we just want to avoid deciding which functions are more important than others.

Second and related is the idea of block grants for state agencies. If you agree to this, you agree to abdicate your power to the executive branch. It will certainly save you time, because there will be no need for any hearings on the budget.

No matter what amount you put in the budget, you will have no way of knowing how it will be spent. No matter what your issue- the waiting list, mass transit, vocational technical education- neither you nor your constituents will know whether those programs are going to be funded.

The current system is not perfect. But it is, at its beating heart, representative democracy. It affords the citizenry the basic right- the right that drove so much of our Revolutionary past- to petition the government for the redress of grievances.

Our current system, where you vote to fund or not fund certain programs and priorities might be frustrating, but it is far superior to a system where faceless bureaucrats, unchallenged and unchallengeable, make those same decisions.

Thank you.