

TESTIMONY OF SAMANTHA BURTON—APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

February 18, 2016

My name is Samantha Burton and I am a registered voter from Bridgeport. I am addressing HB 5044, Governor's Bill "An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017" and specifically the budget earmarked for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

I was working as a bartender from 2002 to 2003. I really enjoyed my job. I had opportunities to meet the most amazing people. But the bar closed and I was out of a job. I was living with my mother at that time. I was going out every day looking for a job. I couldn't find work. Even though I enjoyed bartending I wanted a 9 to 5 job. I began to become discouraged as I looked for work.

I started to isolate myself from family and friends. I began to be very paranoid that my neighbors were after me. I informed my mother what was going on and she told me no one was going to harm me. My mother encouraged me to go to a beauty salon to get my hair done. When I was in the beauty salon I heard my neighbors' voices again. It was like they followed me. I informed my mother what was going on and she brought me to a hospital immediately. When I was in the hospital, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I thought to myself, "I will take medicine for a couple of months and the voices will go away." I was doing well for a couple of months. When I decided to stop taking my medication, I started to hear voices again. But this time they were families' voices, and the voice of psychic Silvia Brown, who appeared on Montel William's show regularly.

It was like the voices had special codes that nobody knew about. Then the voices went from being friendly to being frightening. When the voices were friendly they told me that I have a special power from God and they told me that I can read people's minds and make things move. When the voices were frightening they told me there was no God and they wanted my soul. I informed my mother and she brought me to the hospital. They admitted me for the second time. During my hospital stay, I tried to escape and I even became delusional. I thought I saw a Pope touching my mother's hair. When I was back home, I isolated myself and felt as though I couldn't take it anymore.

My case manager suggested that I go to a clubhouse called "Bridge House," that helps people with psychiatric disabilities. In 2005 I became a member of Bridge House although I didn't want to be there. I wouldn't socialize with anybody. But because of my faith and the love and support that I received from my family, they persuaded me to give the Bridge house a chance again. Bridge House has so many different units. They have an education unit, a member bank unit, a housing unit, and an employment unit. I volunteered in so many different units and even made friends with some of the members.

Bridge House even helped me to get my first TEP (Transitional Employment Program) job which is 6 to 9 months and helps you to get back to the working field. You have a job coach that is with you until you feel comfortable enough to do the job by yourself. I was so excited to be working at the Catholic Center. People were so nice and I felt so confident. I was making my own money and giving back to the community. I felt as though I could do anything. The medication started to work and the voices went away.

It is important that Bridge House continues to be supported in our community and by our state, because there are so many people living with mental illness—whether it is a family member or friend who feels like an outsider, who feels neglected, and discriminated against because of their diagnosis. Bridge House makes you feel loved, and you are special. Bridge House teaches you to be productive and live productively. Your family and friends may have walked out on you but Bridge House’s door is always open to you. Bridge House makes you feel safe. Everybody cares about you—from the staff to the members. The staff works tirelessly every day advocating for the members of Bridge House. The vast majority of people recover from mental illness. They are doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and advocates. People with mental illness have dreams and goals like everybody else. I am so proud to be a member at Bridge House. Bridge House continues to be a positive, encouraging place in people’s lives, including mine. For all the people who live with mental illness, take the lyrics from singer Matthew Wilder’s song, “Ain’t nothing gonna break my stride, nobody gonna hold me down, Oh! No. I got to keep on moving.”

Sincerely,

Samantha Burton