

Testimony of Rayallen Bergman, B.S.

H.B. No. 5044 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017. Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services- Regional Action Council Funding February 18, 2016 Appropriations Subcommittee on Health Public Hearing

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Gerratana and Representative Dillon, my name is Rayallen Bergman and I am the Program Coordinator at Southeastern Regional Action Council and a resident of Putnam, CT. I strongly oppose the significant cuts to Regional Action Councils that will devastate the current network that has been developed between prevention and treatment providers, and has led to a connectedness throughout our region in Southeastern Connecticut.

The current "heroin and opioid epidemic" has created such a draw in the numerous media outlets across the state. However, we tend to forget about the current state of prevention and treatment that has been created through the development of Regional Action Councils in Connecticut. While Connecticut is a national leader in prevention, 25+ years of diligence and dedication (continuously overlooked), were put in by Regional Action Councils (RAC), fortifying this connected network. Without the existence of these Regional Action Councils, this network would not have been forged. There are no other entities in Connecticut that handle this formidable task. This network has changed the dynamic and system of care throughout the region of Eastern Connecticut and I can speak to this personally.

Mental health and substance abuse have been shared experiences in many aspects of my life and other members throughout the community; affecting family, friends and neighbors while growing up in Eastern CT. The change in response to these issues is so evident, such as the access to care, education of providers and the connections between agencies would not have existed without these Regional Action Councils. The ability to contact anyone of these agencies and trust that they have the resource or will be able to connect you directly with the correct resource, is a shared relief among many residents in this region. There has been a call for help around this opioid and heroine epidemic, but the response by Southeastern Regional Action Council in the community, aside from my personal work, has created a shared network of educated responders able to manage this issue. RAC's have leveraged the funding for local coalitions to develop educational forums with experienced professionals, as well as the disbursement of information on where to go and what to do. Alongside education, a few communities have communicated stories where SERAC's Narcan disbursement to Police Departments and trained community members, have literally saved lives. The ability to survey the youth in the region to gauge the issue from Middle School and up, from nearly 20,000 students, gives us a clear scope on the issue present and trends developing in youth. For example, prescription drug prevention has been in place for numerous years, since our network is well aware of the connection between prescription opiates and opium based drugs (i.e. heroine, fentanyl). However, the budgets to support this work of education around substance abuse prevention has continuously been sacrificed in the past, even after great strides.

I am sure these points are well-known among Legislators but as community members, we pride ourselves on the connectedness, created within this network. A question that residents ask, is why dismantle this network's core agency, when the RACs are the most important piece in response to this epidemic and trends that arise? Aside from the epidemic, there are too many initiatives to account for, that have placed CT as a leader in the field of prevention. We cannot overlook the impact these agencies have on our state, let alone our region, when the evidence is clear. I request rethinking the already

incredibly small amount of infrastructure and funding that exists for prevention, versus the devastation that will occur from the current cuts proposed. The prevention funding cuts outlined in Governor Malloy's proposed budget would reduce the overall budget of the RACs by 80%. These cuts would decimate the RAC funding and would significantly impact the resources, technical assistance and services they provide to our communities. We know, for every \$2 spent in prevention, society saves \$10 in intervention and treatment costs.

We need to reject ANY cut to Prevention and propose INCREASED sustainable funding sources so that we can deal with these issue, without the handcuffs of funding to local communities.

Sincerely,

Rayallen Bergman B.S.