

Testimony presented by Marcia DuFore
On behalf of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board
Before the Planning and Development Committee

February 19, 2016

IN OPPOSITION TO PORTIONS OF:

PROPOSED HB 5176

Senator Osten Representative Miller and members of the Committee,

My name is Marcia DuFore. I am a registered voter in Suffield, Connecticut and writing to you as Executive Director of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board (NCRMHB). Our Board's responsibility is to study the mental health needs of people in our region (37 municipalities in North Central Connecticut) and assist the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) with setting priorities for improved and expanded services to meet those needs. Our constituents include people who use mental health and addiction services (young and old), their families and concerned citizens in the towns and cities where services are delivered. Many of our constituents live in poverty and are in need of affordable and supportive housing.

Our concerns for this legislative session are threefold: to protect individual liberties, preserve the safety net, and promote access to the services and supports necessary for people to lead lives in recovery from mental health and addiction challenges.

First of all, we want to express our respect and gratitude to members of the General Assembly and Governor Malloy for your recognition of the importance of and ongoing investment in affordable and supportive housing for some of our most vulnerable citizens - those who are elderly AND/OR disabled.

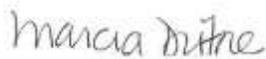
HB 5176 proposes to designate a municipal employee to serve as liaison between that municipality and any state agencies that operate or fund existing or proposed community residences located in that municipality. On the surface this seems like a good idea - for there to be designated people to be responsible for communicating and working out problems. My concern is about the requirement to notify municipalities of plans to locate new community residences there. Such a notice would necessitate divulging private health information about people planning to live in those residences - information we have no right to know about our neighbors unless they choose to share their lives with us. We have all been witness to zoning hearings in which cruel, thoughtless, and discriminatory remarks about individuals with mental illness go on for hours. Many of these remarks are made out of fear and for the purpose of barring people who they perceive as different from living in their community. Not long ago, this occurred in Cromwell. That residence was blocked from opening. The people who were ready and hoping to live there are still living in a state hospital (at a much greater expense to the taxpayers).

HB 5176 also proposes the establishment of a task force to study the distribution of group homes throughout Connecticut. For the last two years I have served on a Manchester task force looking at this very issue. Manchester is a welcoming community with housing stock

suitable to multifamily dwellings and a wide array of good social services and conveniences. The task force was formed out of concern by community officials that they had become a magnet for people with disabilities because they have so much to offer. They felt this led to an undue and unfair burden on their social and emergency services. Perhaps such a study is necessary. Even so, it is important to be thoughtful in our approach to this issue. It should not be conducted for the purpose of excluding, but welcoming people to live successfully in communities of their choice. It should consider more than just numbers, but also the factors and structures that promote healthy, livable, and inclusive communities. Much work has been done in this vein by the Aging Commission in anticipation of a growing number of older adults who will need services, supports, and accommodations to age in place successfully. Much can be learned from their work. Of importance is to include the perspectives of individuals with disabilities in that study as they experience first-hand the impact of factors and structures that make certain communities livable and welcoming vs. unlivable and exclusionary. The North Central Regional Mental Health Board would be pleased to assist this committee with identifying individuals who can lend their voice for such a purpose.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marcia DuFore".

Marcia DuFore, Executive Director
North Central Regional Mental Health Board