

**Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, Inc.**  
The voice in mental health policy.

of Jennifer Gross, Executive Director, Concerning:  
Elderly and Safe Housing for the Elderly and Young Persons with Disabilities  
Before the Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly  
February 23, 2016

Afternoon, Senator Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee. My  
name is Jennifer Gross, and I am from the town of Ledyard, Connecticut. I am also the Executive Director of the  
Eastern Regional Mental Health Board (ERMHB) in Norwich, Connecticut.

The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board has a statutory mandate to evaluate state-funded mental health  
programs for adults, assess unmet needs, and make recommendations for improvements to  
the Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. We serve the 39 towns in  
Eastern Connecticut (most of Windham County, part of Tolland County, and all of Windham County), and  
are required to include representatives from each of those towns, providing local citizens with a means for  
communicating their concerns to the highest levels of state government.

We are a grassroots-style organization with the truest sense of the word, by virtue of our membership  
structure, which includes all stakeholders in the mental health community. The membership of our four  
Catchment Area Councils (CACs) at the basic level for citizen involvement, includes those with lived  
experience of mental health issues; young adults to senior citizens; their family members; provider  
representatives; and concerned citizens. At our monthly CAC meetings, we receive reports of service  
barriers and other concerns, and the most recurrent themes is the severe lack of safe and affordable  
housing in Eastern Connecticut.

**The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board opposes the proposed bills SB 157, and any legislation that  
would ultimately restrict the rights of people with disabilities to live in housing originally intended for  
them to share with senior citizens.**

It is wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of irrelevant characteristics beyond someone's  
control, including age and diagnosis. It is inappropriate to regulate disruptive or dangerous behavior, which is  
a completely separate issue.

At our regular monthly meetings, we hear about from seniors. Their first fear is that they will be forced out of their apartments and will not be  
able to find anything they can afford. Their second fear is of being victimized by those selling drugs to them. Third, they fear harassment because of their  
disability.

The vast majority of both seniors and people with disabilities are good neighbors, and have lived in public  
housing for years without incident. They do not stop swearing, drinking, or staying up late as soon as  
they become seniors. Indeed, the problems associated with Alzheimer's disease and other

forms of dementia are at least as disruptive and no more tolerable because older. Yet senior housing programs and nursing homes are learning to deal with these behaviors.

Everyone should be assessed and planned for individually, whether in the community, in specialized housing, or in nursing homes. Good community agencies and good facilities, a matter of course, and when they receive adequate funding, they are able to do it very effectively. Professionals try to match individual needs with program resources under the assumption that there is an appropriate place for everyone. If that is not the case, then it is our responsibility to make it so. If we arise, we should look for the source, not blame someone put in the wrong place by circumstances. That is scapegoating.

Elderly and disabled housing programs already have behavioral standards. Dangerous, disruptive, and predatory behavior is against the rules, and people who do not conform must leave. Enforcing these rules and educating older residents about the problems and younger disabled people is a better way to protect the rights of all who need these programs.

Excluding people with disabilities from housing opportunities will not protect them from abuse or victimization. It is an illusion of a solution that gives legal sanction to practices that adds immeasurably to the burden of disability.

Thank you for your consideration.