



Donald A. Neel  
Board Chair

Luis B. Pérez, LCSW  
President & CEO

**Testimony before the Planning and Development Committee regarding:**

**H.B. No. 5176 – AN ACT CONCERNING COMMUNITY RESIDENCES**

**February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Senator Osten, Representative Miller and distinguished members of the Planning and Development Committee, my name is Suzi Craig and I am the Senior Director of Advocacy at Mental Health Connecticut (formerly known as the Mental Health Association of Connecticut). As an advocacy organization, direct service provider and educator, Mental Health Connecticut helps residents across this state improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and reach their full potential.

I am here to encourage you to retain Section 8-3e of the general statutes and repeal the proposed HB 5176, "An Act Concerning Community Residences."

The description of the bill appears rather harmless, but this bill actually represents a violation of people's privacy and fair housing rights in two distinct ways.

First, the bill would amend existing Section 8-3e to allow for a municipal employee to serve as a liaison between the municipality and the Department of Public Health, the Department of Developmental Services and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. DPH, DDS, and DMHAS would then be required to inform this liaison of any existing or proposed community residences that are located within the liaison's municipality.

Second, the bill calls for establishing a task force to study the distribution of community residences throughout the state. The Task Force (and it is vague as to who is appointed to this task force) is "required to submit a report on its findings and recommendations to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to planning and development."

This bill should be opposed because it creates opportunities for discrimination to emerge. Creating a task force to study the distribution of such residences throughout the state and notifying the placement of community-based residential facilities would require the release of health care information about the individuals served by those facilities. This targets people with disabilities for direct discrimination and creates barriers for them to live in the most integrated community setting as possible.

The privacy of personal information is protected under both state and federal law, and determining sites for a community-based residence is not one of the exceptions to rules preventing disclosure of this information. In addition, people with disabilities who are served by certain residential facilities have protections under state and federal law against discrimination. Denying permission to approve this type



**Donald A. Neel**  
Board Chair

**Luis B. Pérez, LCSW**  
President & CEO

of housing in certain locations could result in the State having to defend legal challenges under both Connecticut and Federal Fair Housing laws.

In Danbury, there is a man I'll call "Joe" who had chosen to be homeless for nearly 25 years. Many people tried to help Joe with services and he continually denied them. Then, one day Joe decided he didn't want to be homeless anymore. He turned to our staff in Danbury who first found him supportive housing and then, after time, helped him find work. Just recently, Joe moved into his own apartment.

There are thousands of other success stories in Connecticut that we could share. But, they are only successes because the people helping others to make crucial life decisions are the people who know the people in need who are being served in the community – and are trained to work with people who have disabilities.

People have the right to live in the least restricted environment and the right to community integration. Decisions on a placement are person-centered and made between the individual and his/her health care providers, not by a spreadsheet.

Please deny passage of HB 5176.

If, however, the committee decides to proceed further with this idea, it is imperative that people with disabilities, and their advocates, be included as members of this task force. Any actions proposed by this task force in their report must comply with anti-discrimination laws and further the state's obligation to comply with the community integration mandate of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Thank you for your time and for your service.

*Suzi Craig*  
*Senior Director of Advocacy*  
*Mental Health Connecticut, Inc.*  
*61 South Main Street, Suite 100*  
*West Hartford, CT 06107*  
*Office: 860-529-1970, ext. 205; Mobile: 860-384-4480*  
*scraig@mhconn.org*