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**Written Testimony Supporting House Bill 5271,
An Act Concerning Mental Health Training in State and Local Police Training
Programs and the Availability of Providers of
Mental Health Services on an On-Call Basis
February 24, 2016**

Senator Gerrata, Representative Ritter, and members of the Public Health Committee. My name is David McGuire, and I am the Legislative and Policy Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I submit this testimony in support of House Bill 5271, An Act Concerning Mental Health Training in State and Local Police Training Programs and the Availability of Providers of Mental Health Services on an On-Call Basis.

The ACLU of Connecticut believes in defending and promoting justice and equality for all, and this bill would help to ensure that “all” includes people with mental health conditions. By giving police officers the training they need to quickly and safely respond to individuals who are experiencing a mental health crisis, this bill will uphold public safety and ensure people with mental health conditions or developmental disabilities are treated fairly and justly when encountering police. This bill would prepare police by requiring that all basic and review police training programs include a course of not less than two hours on handling incidents involving an individual affected with a serious mental health condition and an individual affected with a developmental disability.

Police officers, the general public, and people with mental illness alike will be equally well-served by this bill. Unfortunately, police often find themselves having to rapidly respond, in order to protect public safety or an individual’s life, when our neighbors experience mental health crises. Without proper training and support, police responses can unintentionally escalate these already dangerous situations. Indeed, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in four people killed in officer-involved

shootings in the United States is person with a mental illness, and the ACLU of Connecticut's data has shown that the majority of people who died after being Tased by police in Connecticut have been experiencing mental health or substance-use-related crises. With proper mental health crisis training, police officers may be better able to avoid such uses of force.

It is therefore critical that police are able to protect themselves, the general public, and individuals with mental illness by learning how to safely and effectively de-escalate crisis situations. Recognizing this, 44 police departments across the state currently have at least one crisis intervention trained person on staff, including departments in Berlin, Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Britain, New London, Putnam, and Willimantic. This bill would ensure that all police departments in our state to do the right thing, for themselves and the public, by following suit.

Today, nearly 50 million people in the United States have some form of mental illness. Unfortunately, police are often the first and only responders when someone with mental illness experiences the psychological equivalent of a heart attack. Just as we would not expect an EMT to know how to provide CPR without training, we also would not expect law enforcement officials to appropriately and safely respond to people experiencing mental health crises without crisis intervention training. This bill would address that need by requiring all police departments to contract with or employ an on-call mental health services provider to be available on an on-call basis, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Please support this critical and potentially life-saving bill to uphold justice and public safety for all.