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## **Testimony to the Public Health Committee on HB 5271, An Act Concerning Mental Health Training in Police Programs and the Availability of On-Call Mental Health Services**

March 7, 2016

Senator Giarratana, Representative Ritter, and members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Margaret Watt, resident of Norwalk and Executive Director of the Southwest Regional Mental Health Board. I am writing to you to support and also comment on HB 5271, a proposal to provide mental health training to state and local police and provide on-call mental health services as a support to police officers.

**Ensuring that police officers have knowledge, skills, and support to deal with individuals with a mental health condition or experiencing a crisis is essential.** There are too many examples of negative encounters between people with a mental illness and police officers, which have led to unnecessary abuse, injury, or even death. Police departments such as Fairfield's, which has invested heavily in Crisis Intervention Training for officers and even schedules their officers to ensure there is always a CIT-trained officer on duty, have had excellent results.

At the same time, **2 hours of mental health training is no more than a start—enough time to give an overview of some signs and symptoms but not enough time to understand how to respond or to practice skills in simulated situations, which is critical for any officer who may be working with a person in crisis.** Any training that is provided should be a proven, evidence-based curriculum such as the Public Safety Module of the Mental Health First Aid course, an 8-hour course that is already being offered in the state, or the Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) offered by CABLE.

No amount of training can ever substitute for the services of a mental health professional. The bill currently proposes mandating that municipalities "employ or contract with" mental health services as an on-call support to police officers. **Rather than placing the burden on municipalities of identifying and evaluating providers for that purpose, I urge you to consider that municipalities can and should be making use of the "mobile crisis" services (both adult and child) that already exist for that purpose throughout the state, but which are underfunded.** Legislation that strengthens the relationship between state/local police and mobile crisis and that supports funding of mobile crisis would be beneficial to all parties.

Thank you.

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