

Testimony by Marcia DuFore  
On behalf of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board  
Before the Insurance and Real Estate Committee  
Regarding: HB 6887  
February 16, 2017

Senators Larson and Kelly, Representative Scanlon and distinguished Senators and Representatives of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee,

My name is Marcia DuFore and I am a registered voter in the town of Suffield, Connecticut. I am testifying as private citizen and Executive Director on behalf the North Central Regional Mental Health Board (NCRMHB).

I am testifying in support of HB 6887: "AN ACT EXPANDING COVERAGE FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES.

Our Board's responsibility, established by Connecticut statute 40 years ago, is to study the mental health and needs of people in our region and assist the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) with setting priorities. So, on a professional level, this is a topic of great concern to me and one that our members identify as a top priority in all our needs assessments. But the opiate epidemic has reached such proportions of late, that is hard for any of us to view the problem from a distance – a problem that does not touch someone we hold dear. That happened for me this year – with a close family friend I will call Abigail.

Abigail was first treated in a hospital emergency department and came home with discharge paperwork recommending she seek follow-up treatment for her opiate addiction. She wanted to get better, she just didn't know exactly how to go about it. There was no one to talk with her or her family about recovery, made sure she had a sense of direction for the next steps, or a connection to follow-up treatment.

Our first call was to a friend who is in long term recovery from a heroin addiction. We asked if he would talk to Abby. That was a good first step. We also directed her to the Advocacy Unlimited TOIVO and TurningPointCT websites and showed her pictures of some of people. See him, he found recovery in prison. See her – she is also in recovery. See teaches Yoga at TOIVO. See her – she also came clean in prison. Read her blog. These were a source of hope and direction at a critical moment for someone I care deeply about.

We called treatment centers. Navigation through this maze was a nightmare and Abby was in no position to figure all this out on her own. Since then Abby has been through partial hospitalization, intensive outpatient and group therapy, and medication assisted treatment with Suboxone. She sees a private therapist. This is a journey, but so far Abby is clean and hasn't relapsed. This is different than most of the stories I hear at Opioid forums or from desperate family members who call my office. Their stories are about repeated detox and rehab, constant fear of or response to overdose. But Abby had timely access to good treatment and she had access to peer guides who engaged, encouraged, and

offered hope. It was a peer who helped her find appropriate treatment, encouraged her to try Suboxone, exposed her to holistic approaches like yoga and massage, and validated her concerns about side effects of Suboxone and a desire to work her way off medication. Commercial insurance doesn't offer reimbursement for peer services, but DMHAS provides grant funding to peer run organizations like Advocacy Unlimited and CCAR and providers who integrate peer services into an array of recovery oriented services. Unfortunately, DMHAS grant funding is in jeopardy. According to the Governor's recent budget proposal, an additional \$4.7 million will be cut from DMHAS grant funded services in the next budget year. About \$500,000 was cut from peer services last year. We need to find other ways to pay for this critical service.

People lose out on recovery every day because they lack support at critical junctures for treating this illness and moving on toward long term sustained recovery. We lose out because some of these people die and those who love them suffer immensely. We lose out because of the economic cost of repeated crisis care and the number of people who don't find recovery and become productive citizens.

We have a crisis. Please move this bill forward and help us ensure that insurance coverage for mental health and addiction includes critically needed peer support services.