

**Testimony before the Insurance and Real Estate Committee**

**February 16, 2017**

**H.B. 6887 AN ACT EXPANDING COVERAGE FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES.**

Michaela I. Fissel, Windsor

Good Afternoon Respective Members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee,

Thank you for holding this public hearing on H.B. 6887 AN ACT EXPANDING COVERAGE FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICES.

My name is Michaela I. Fissel and I am a resident of Windsor where I reside with my three young sons and husband.

Looking back over the last 30 years of my life, I have overcome a myriad of challenges that are often associated with a "mental illness", including homelessness, addiction, an unplanned pregnancy, involvement with the criminal justice system, and multiple suicide attempts. I'm sure that you all have pictures of what that may look like for a young person, so I will not belabor you with the gory details of my personal story.

However, it is important that you do know a bit about where I have been so that you can understand that recovery is not only achievable, but that we, collectively, have a responsibility to establish the context through which individuals have the opportunity to heal, grow, and get back on track to live well.

For me, and many of my peers, the turning point in our trajectories came when a person in recovery demonstrated another way that was not dependent on treatment. This person was vibrant, full of life, working, had a family, and most importantly they were committed to living well. They connected around the lived experience of a mental health and addiction challenge offering an option to re-define what I was told was a disability that I'd have to learn to live within the limits of.

For the vast majority of young people, the topics of mental health and addiction call to mind pictures of death, despair, and hopelessness. I can say this with certainty because I have interviewed hundreds of young people around the state of Connecticut over the past 8 years through three independent research projects. I can assure you that we have yet to even begin to scratch the surface of re-framing this conversation amongst young people.

Personally, by the time recovery was made an option in my life I had been pushed through so many treatment programs that I was becoming increasingly helpless. At the age of 21 - that is the complete opposite of what we expect of an emerging adult. Was a capable of living well? Sure - clearly. Yet, I was not given an opportunity to see my life as something more than a consumer of services and a burden on society. I was convinced that I would be Angelina Jolie from *Girl Interrupted* for the rest of my life, and there was a perfect system for me to do just that.

Peer support has been consistently reported as an evidence based practice<sup>1</sup> and it is imperative that within Connecticut this support continue to remain peer-directed to ensure that it maintains the integrity of the discipline as a distinct non-clinical practice. This is important because putting the onus on insurance companies, provider networks, and hospital associations to define the service, and design the delivery of care, will lead to decreased effectiveness. Peer support will no longer be relevant to the experience of a person who is experiencing a mental health or addiction challenge. It will literally become a business transaction.

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, L., Bellamy, C, Guy, K., and Miller, R. Peer support among persons with severe mental illness: A review of evidence and experience. *World Psychiatry* 2012; 11:123-128.

I give you a tremendous amount of credit for even entertaining the idea of peer support becoming a reimbursable service because it prioritizes this practice as a credible option. However, Connecticut is already on track with peer-delivered services. Our state is actually ahead of the majority of our country in this regard. Therefore, I would ask that peer support be removed from the proposed legislation.

I am available to offer further information on the research, policy, and practice related to peer-delivered services - particularly as it relates to emerging adults.

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