



1079 Whalley Ave
New Haven CT 06515
Phone (203) 498-4160
Fax (203) 498-4165

Testimony before the Insurance Committee February 10, 2017

Good morning, Senator Kelly, Senator Larson, Representative Scanlon, and distinguished members of the Insurance Committee:

My name is Elsa Ward, I am the Assistant Director South Central Peer Services, a division of Continuum of Care in New Haven. I am here to speak on HB 6887, An Act Expanding Coverage for Mental Health Care Services and Substance Abuse Services.

I am in favor of this bill because I believe that the primary problem with our system is that people with severe & persistent mental illness and/or chronic substance abuse problems lack the support needed to maintain community living.

This often results in over-utilization of emergency rooms, hospitals and intensive treatment programs. When case management and peer support services are utilized on an ongoing basis, there is a decrease in the number of hospitalizations and emergency room visits.

Continuum of Care provides case management and has one of the largest Peer Support Programs in the state, with over 40 employed Peer Support Specialists. Case managers coordinate supports by assisting the client to navigate the primary care and mental health system, as well as housing and other community services.

One of the most important aspects of the Peer Support person's job is to help individuals overcome the stigma often associated with mental illness by moving forward in their lives, integrating into the community, and sustaining self-sufficiency. Peers also give people hope, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. The staff's personal lived experience is what provides the hope and inspiration. These skills and interventions cannot necessarily be provided by licensed clinical staff that may have never experienced deep stigma attached to mental illness.

Peer Support Specialists have the ability to relate and truly understand the meaning of depression and isolation. Where we may think "lazy", they think "depressed", where we think "difficult client" they think "this isn't working, what approach can we take". Peer Support Specialists look outside the box and attempt to reach people where they are at. It is through this unique approach that draw the client to them.

Case management links people to the necessary resources to avoid future relapses and /or hospitalizations. By working together, the team of case managers and peer support specialists tackle all facets of a person's life. It is through this work that change occurs more effectively.

Peer Support Specialists help people overcome barriers that they struggle with, such as taking that next step and following through with doctor appointments, encouraging and seeking employment, attending community support meetings, such as NAMI or AA/NA.

For Peer Support Specialists I believe people should go through an intensive training program and certification to ensure compliance with standards of care. Case managers should have a Bachelor's degree.

Services billable for Peer Support Specialists should be based on skill building activities that enhance a client's wellbeing.

I would like to share a short success story.

We had a client in our Crisis Program multiple times. He was homeless and addicted to alcohol. He utilized the ED and psychiatric hospital when faced with nowhere to go. He was medically and psychiatrically compromised, having diabetes and severe mental illness. We connected him to a Peer Support Specialist. Every day they spent time together building a bond. At first he was opposed to sober housing and AA meetings though with time he attended AA meetings with the Peer and after 30 days he did not abuse his insulin, took his psych medication and did not go to the ED, he agreed to sober housing. The Peer brought him to 3 places and he chose the one he thought would be best for him. The peer took him to look for employment and helped him get a job. After 4 months, he was still employed and housed. He stayed connected to the program and the peer support specialist for 8 months. At the end of that time he was stable, there were no hospitalizations, he was still employed and maintaining his housing.

I urge you to support important services for people with mental health and/or substance use disorders.

Thank you for considering my perspective

Elsa Ward, BS
Assistant Director
South Central Peer Services
Continuum of Care
1079 Whalley Avenue
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