Good evening. My name is Jennifer Konwitz. I am a registered voter in Westport and a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I am here to testify in regards to the proposed budget for behavioral health and substance abuse services. The budget must be maintained at the current level and ideally increased.

These services save lives, impact lives everyday. Not only of those of us that suffer from these illnesses, but also our families. Those services saved my life! Impacted my family's life. By cutting any funding to this area of the budget, you are putting people like me at higher risk than is necessary. These services allow us to get help, without fear of judgement, or fear if its available to us, when we are in need of it!

I was only 8 years old when I was diagnosed and started on both talk therapy and medication therapy for severe mental illness. Most people don't start such therapies till their teen years. My parents, helped me deal with timed medications and getting to and from doctors appointments weekly for therapy. They also taught me where to go for help if ever I needed it and what to say when asking for it. Never did I think I'd need to do that until last September when I found myself walking into St. Vincent's medical center asking for psych help! I would be in patient in their hospital for 6 days!

The lowest point I have sunk to yet in my illness. I soon learned psych hospitals are very different from regular hospitals. For example visiting hours. There are only 4 visiting hours a clay and they are segregated into two, 2 hour periods. At no other time can you have visitors. Also, I signed myself into the hospital, but only the doctors could decide when I could leave - no leaving against medical advice allowed. Once you are in, the doctors control when you leave, period! Also, they do a search of your body to see what wounds you have before you go in - usually in the
Emergency Room. Now I learned later, that a dear friend of mine, in Manchester CT, also went to an ED around the time I was in patient and our searches were done very differently! Mine was done in a room with a nurse. My friends - in a hallway of the ED, in public view of everyone, by a nurse. Both of us had our scratches documented - mind you we are down to our underwear when this is done. I later asked my therapist and got this answer: "all hospitals have to search and document injuries prior to admitting a patient, but there is no standard on where this must be done!" And all hospitals must make sure psych patients are safe, but again how that is determined is up to each hospital! Where then, I wonder is dignity for the person? Now you see, we need more funding! To standardize care.

I was again in the hospital when diagnosed for conversion disorder, a type of seizure disorder, and this time was at Norwalk Hospital. The people there wanted to put me in an inpatient psych ward due to my medical history. Problem was, conversion disorder is a new diagnosis, and treating me as a psych patient at that moment would not have helped me! Again hospitals are only following what they know, yet at the same time, just cause I have psych issues, doesn't mean I'm allowed going to be a psych patient! We need to better train our emergency and hospital workers when it comes to treating behavioral and substance abuse patients, but that takes funds! I'm at least grateful the services are available when and if I need them. But let's not diminish a person's dignity or real reasons for seeking help!

Housing is another issue. I lost my apt over 2 years ago and moved in my 77 year old father's home. My husband and I are grateful for the family support, but now my husband finds himself caretaker of me/ my father + finding work, which isn't easy.
Because I cannot drive I have to find work close to home & hope I can hold down the job longer than a few months. We are searching for a place of our own, but low income housing is very hard to come by and when it does open up, it closes just as fast!

Every organization across our great state that helps people and their families like mine is in desperate need of funding. Please do not cut any funds from the services for those of us with behavioral health and substance abuse issues. Besides the elderly, we are a very fragile population. However, given proper medical help and housing we can also be very productive members of society. Most of us, myself included, only want enough help so we can get on our own two feet and be as independent as we can!

Thank you for your time.