Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
on the Governor’s Proposed FY 2020-2021 Budget
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Claire Bien, Hamden, CT

Good evening Senators Osten and Formica; Representatives Walker and Lavielle; and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Claire Bien. I am a registered voter in the town of Hamden and work as a research associate at the Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health and as a grantwriter/community relations professional at The Connection. As an inveterate volunteer, I am a founder and past president of NAMI Elm City and facilitate two Hearing Voices/psychosis support groups in New Haven. I am also a person in long-term recovery from hearing voices.

I’m here this evening to testify on the Governor’s proposed budget. The proposed $1.16 million dollar cut to the research budget of the Connecticut Mental Health Center (CMHC) will have a devastating impact on the ability of faculty at Yale and CMHC to conduct research on innovative treatments for people with serious mental illness. This loss of funding will dramatically diminish CMHC’s ability to contribute to advances in treatment. It will also rob people with lived experience of mental illness of important and life-affirming opportunities to play a role in helping to develop more humane, less costly, and ultimately more effective treatments.

As I said a moment ago, I am a person in long-term recovery from hearing voices. In past years I have testified about the excellent care I had within the Yale Psychiatric system because I am educated, grew up knowing that I was loved, and had good private insurance. Those gifts, bestowed largely by an accident of birth, allowed me not only to negotiate the terms of my treatment, but also to manage its course, resulting in my ability to achieve and maintain the degree of recovery you see here.

It has also, to my delight, created opportunities to begin collaborating with Dr. Phil Corlett and members of his team on research that explores the phenomenon of auditory hallucinations. This research examines the nature and root causes of hallucinations, and in collaboration with people with lived experience, understand their nature and origins in order to reduce their negative impact on the lives of those who experience them. A number of my peers with lived experience are working with other researchers at Yale on projects that seek to foster understanding of the impact that social interactions and societal strictures and norms have on our minds, spirits, and lives.

In addition to enhancing innovation, an important outcome of these collaborations is that with communication, understanding, and support comes healing—irrespective of the circumstance. Innovation and understanding can also help improve the clinical services that CMHC and mental health agencies like The Connection offer to some of the most vulnerable members of our communities—those who were not as lucky as I. The behavioral health services offered by The Connection, including residential and scattered-site supportive housing programs and outpatient clinical care, are vitally important in helping people with mental illness and addictions move from crisis, to stability, and back into the community. Maintaining funding for research that can improve and enhance service provision will help CMHC, The Connection, and other mental health services networks throughout the state maintain the existing continuum of care, helping to reduce costly hospital stays, assisting in preventing a logjam in the system, and minimizing risk to those who suffer.

Thank you for your attention.

Claire Bien