Good evening Senator Osten, Rep. Walker, members of the Appropriations Committee and to my state Senator Mae Flexor and Rep. Susan Johnson. I am here to speak to you about the DMHAS budget.

My name is Christopher Mezzerone and I am a registered voter in the town of Windham. I am an active mental health advocate with Keep the Promise Coalition. I am the face of mental health. Mental illness doesn’t choose sides; it doesn't know whether you are a Democrat or a Republican. It’s a human condition that affects 1 in 5 Americans.

Connecticut has had some fairly good services for people with mental illness in the past. However, cuts of over 26 million to the DMHAS budget since 2013 have taken a toll on this vital service to those of us with a chronic mental health condition.

It is not uncommon to have no empty mental health beds in the State of CT for those who go to their local emergency rooms seeking help. A bed in the emergency room while waiting for a mental health bed does not help us to get better any faster.

Another loss for CT is that we used to have 29 social club programs serving our state. This number has dwindled to 24 clubhouses. Social programs and clubhouses are a cost effective way to offer peer support, counseling and a variety of recovery focused activities to persons with a mental illness. My involvement with the Lighthouse, a part of a private non-profit, called United Services, has helped me to have a focus, support and a mission for helping others and myself to recover from mental illness.

Lastly, I would like to address my concerns about the limited transportation especially in the forgotten, quiet corner of northeastern CT, which is harmful to all citizens living in this area. For those of us with mental illness, this same lack of transportation translates into further poverty, isolation, depression and a lack of human dignity. We have individuals who can’t work part-time because there is inadequate bus transportation.

Thank you for supporting adequate levels of funding along with cost of living funding for vital mental health services for some of CT’s most vulnerable citizens.