

Testimony before the Insurance and Real Estate Committee March 5, 2019
HB 5270: An Act Concerning Peer Support Specialists and Requiring Health Insurance Coverage for Outpatient Peer Support Services Provided By Certified Peer Support Specialists.

Jeffrey Santo, RSS

Senator Lesser, Representative Scanlon, and distinguished members of the committee,

My name is Jeffrey Santo, and I am a registered voter in the city of Norwalk, Connecticut. I am a member of Recovery Innovations for Pursuing Peer Leadership and Empowerment, better known as RIPPLE. On March 2, 2018, I became a certified Recovery Support Specialist. I've come before you today to voice my support for HB 5270 because I believe Recovery Support Specialists bring something unique to the table. The RSS is perhaps the easiest person on a client's treatment team to identify with and trust. We understand what it is like to be in crisis and live with mental illness. For that reason alone we have one of the most powerful tools of recovery, common ground.

I have been diagnosed with depression, PTSD, and generalized anxiety disorder. It is estimated that one out of every five people in the United States live with some form of mental illness. It is also estimated that one out of every two people will experience a mental health crisis at some point in their lives. A properly trained Peer with lived experience can be a tremendous resource on someone's recovery journey. Thanks to the certification classes offered by Advocacy Unlimited that resource is abundant in our community and it is always growing.

In October of 2012, the World Health Organization called depression a global crisis. On average we lose 16 veterans and 4 active-duty personnel/reservists a day. In a March 2018 article USA Today reported the suicide rate for children and teens between the ages of 10 and 17 was up an average of 73 percent from 2006 to 2016. USA Today also reported in April of 2018 that more officers and firefighters died of suicide than line-of-duty deaths in 2017.

It is impossible for us to predict when a mental health crisis will occur or who will have one. No one is immune and mental illness does not discriminate. On February 23, 2019, the Middletown Press reported that a state social worker with nearly 19 years of service died by suicide on the Connecticut Valley Hospital campus. Not only was this woman surrounded by mental health professionals she was one herself. I can't explain why she did not reach out and try to talk to someone she trusted. All I can tell you is that in my experience mental health is fluid and can change from one day to the next.

During my recovery, I have worked with Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Licensed Clinical Social Workers, and many other psychiatric professionals. While it is true traditional treatment providers gave me the foundation to begin rebuilding my life; it was my peers in recovery that help me put all the pieces back together. I am living proof that peer support is an effective part of a person's treatment plan, and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) agrees.

Peer support is an evidence-based mental health practice. SAMHSA recognizes that a Recovery Support Specialist can be an important part of treatment for those living with mental illness or addiction. By supporting this bill, you will allow mental health providers to expand their services to clients while increasing the effectiveness of the overall treatment experience.

I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and for considering new ways to help members of our community who live with mental illness.