

## Testimony to the Mental Health Service Working Group

Tuesday, January 29, 2013

My name is Billy Bromage. I reside at 49 West Rock Avenue in New Haven. I am a professional social worker, educated at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I have been employed in the community mental health system in Connecticut for over 15 years. I am also the proud father of three children, who attend public grammar and middle schools in New Haven.

Thank you for taking the time to convene this hearing, and for giving me and other concerned citizens of the state an opportunity to be a part of this vitally important conversation.

We are all looking for answers to the unbearable tragedy that occurred in Newtown. For many people, mental health services are at the forefront of those answers. There are several bills to address mental health services that have been proposed by your colleagues, and are being discussed today. A collection of bills have been created from a reactionary perspective, and are exactly the wrong kinds of legislation to consider. Many of these bills stem from the climate of fear and scapegoating, while one in particular – **SB 285** – capitalizes on that climate in a callous and opportunistic manner. It may be a natural reaction for some people to respond to tragedy by attempting to “keep the wolves at the door” and blame the “other”. This has been reflected in the introduction of **HB 5659**, **HB 5681**, and **HB 5683**, all of which would give probate courts wide authority to commit people to outpatient treatment, thus limiting the rights and personal freedoms of people living with mental illness, *our fellow citizens*.

Testimonies delivered today by people in recovery, their family members, and those professionals allied with them in the recovery process clearly indicate that endorsing new authority to mandate outpatient treatment is exactly the wrong approach. We are not people who advocate turning down an opportunity to get help when it's needed, especially in moments of crisis. We are the very people who have either been in those moments of crisis ourselves, or, as in my case, stood by and assisted people through those moments. I have built my entire career on supporting people to reach their goals as members of their community, and have assisted people in getting connected to outpatient mental health services hundreds of times. It is critically important to distinguish the line between assisting someone in the path to mental wellness, and taking on a paternalistic role of unwarranted control.

Many of us in this room have worked tirelessly to develop communities that are more inclusive and respectful of individual rights and freedoms. We have labored to dismantle paternalistic and discriminatory systems, and fought to protect civil rights, some of us at great personal expense. Some legislation being proposed during this session leads us in the opposite direction, and has the potential to establish second class status for *our friend, family members, clients, and neighbors* living with mental illness. Therefore, I urge you to reject reactionary legislation, and to **strongly oppose HB 5659, HB 5681, HB 5683, and SB 285**.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. And thank you for your work to protect the rights of all people in our state.