

Public Hearing of the Mental Health Working Group of the Bipartisan Task Force
in response to Sandy Hook

Date: January 29, 2013

Testimony of Patricia Benedict, Director of Citizens Project

I want to thank the Honorable Senator Toni Harp and Representative Terrie Wood and members of the Mental Health Working Group for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Patricia Benedict. I'm here to speak about a wonderful program that we've been operating for over twelve years in New Haven-The Citizens Project which is operated by the Connecticut Mental Health Center and the Yale Department of Psychiatry through its Program for Recovery and Community Health. The Citizens Project is funded by DMHAS, but I am not speaking to you as a DMHAS representative. The Citizens Project began as a two year randomized study developed by Dr's. Michael Rowe and Madelon Baranoski of Yale University designed for people who have serious mental illness, co-occurring with substance abuse and recent criminal justice histories. The Citizens Project addresses what we have identified as the 5 R's of citizenship and full membership in one's community: Rights, Responsibilities, Roles, Resources, and Relationships. It has since become an ongoing program with four components with which we provide services for fifteen to eighteen students each six month period.

The first component is "wraparound" peer support provided by forensic peer mentors—people with lived experience with mental illness and previous criminal justice charges. Research conducted at Yale has shown that "peers" have a special ability to connect with people with serious mental illnesses, including people with previous histories of violence and motivate them to enter treatment. Forensic peer mentors are also role models for students, showing them that they, too, can recover and make positive contributions to society.

The second component are courses geared toward citizenship and community membership—rights and responsibilities in regard to the mental health and criminal justice systems, housing availability, life coping skills, vocational opportunities, and many other topics. These topics are taught by us and staff of outside agencies.

The third component is a group held in the beginning of each class that our students created and coined, "What's Up" This is facilitated by the students where they share what's happening in their lives, how they are feeling and their

reaction to it. Students receive open and honest feedback from their class mates and the staff. "What's Up" provides the students with as they've stated, "A safe place to talk about their feelings, a place where they don't feel judged, where they can express themselves honestly." This group provides the student's with a venue that allows them to practice and process all the skills and information provided by the classes. For example; one of our classes provides housing resources, students will talk not only about their experience of obtaining housing but also the challenges they face in remaining housed, receiving feedback and support as they go thru this.

The fourth component is the valued role projects. The valued role projects give students a way to give back to their communities while, at the same time, demonstrating to fellow community members their ability to be positive, participating community members. Examples of group and individual valued role projects have been teaching police cadets about the experience of being homeless and having a mental illness or volunteering to mow the grass for an elderly neighbor.

Relationships are a major difficulty for most of our students. This was true for one student who had dealt with serious mental illness, a history of hospitalizations and incarceration. When he came to the Citizens Project, he was extremely quiet and physically hid himself in dark clothing, a hood, dark glasses and a beard. It took a few months, but he opened up, even becoming a group facilitator and role model for other students. His goals, which he's working on now, are to attend GED classes, get his driver's license, and attend local poetry readings. He recited one of his poems as part of his valued role project.

Anger is another difficult challenge for our students to deal with. As one of our current students who deals with a serious mental illness and has had previous experiences with violent behavior expressed to us recently, he believed that Citizens Project has helped him to express his anger in more constructive ways and has learned how to diffuse his anger by talking through the process with his classmates and other support systems.

Another student dealt with a serious mental illness, spent a large part of his life incarcerated and was a previous gang banger on the streets of Hartford and who normally ran from the police. After participating in our program, he was faced with a situation where he normally would have reacted violently; instead he turned to the police for help. This individual graduated our program, is currently taking care of his family, attending church and volunteers at a soup kitchen.

I could tell you many other stories that speak to the difference that Citizens Project has made in our students lives and the positive impact they've have in their communities. Students have gone on to school, obtained housing, employment, renewed family connections and build positive social networks in the community. Most importantly though, every student has improved in one way or another their connection to their primary community, be that their family, their church, or the New Haven community as a whole, *and* have improved in their relationship with themselves as individuals of value and worth.

Now, these are good stories, but what about other ways of measuring the impact of the Citizens Project? We have conducted rigorous research on the Citizens Project—a “randomized controlled study” in which people with serious mental illnesses and criminal justice charges were randomly assigned to participate in the Citizens Project or to receive “current services” at the CMHC. This research showed that Citizens Project students used alcohol and drug use decreased significantly and had a significantly improved quality of life over time compared to “current services” participants.

In addition, our qualitative research has shown that “being a student” is a valued role for Citizens Project students, one that helps them set their sights higher, and that the Citizens Project is a mini-community that prepares people for full citizenship in society overall.

Our students are people of value, worth, intelligence and integrity. Through this process we help them to honor their life challenges, whether they are mental, physical or spiritual so that they take care of those challenges and not reject them. We help students to believe, and they continually teach us, that every human being has something of value to contribute to this society. Our vision for the students who have shared equally with us in creating this program—includes a Citizens Project in every large community in the state.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions, or would like to learn more about the Citizens Project.

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