

**Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety**  
**Mental Health Subcommittee**  
**January 29, 2013**

Good afternoon/evening Senator Harp, Representative Wood, and distinguished committee members. My name is Paul Acker, co-chair of the Keep the Promise Coalition's Adult Committee, Coordinator of Social Rehabilitation at InterCommunity in East Hartford, and a person in recovery from long-term mental illness. I want to talk to you today about mental health recovery and the importance of this model in helping people get better. I have seen in my own life and my current occupation the principles of choice, empowerment, shared decision-making, community integration and self-determination as playing a critical role in recovery.

It hasn't always been this way. In my own life I've been told what I can and can't do. Providers told me that I could never work again, that I would always be this way and that I could rely on social security disability for the rest of my life. What they didn't tell me was that it was a life of poverty and social isolation. Once you start down this road, it's hard to find the off-ramps. My depression fed my isolation which starved my self-esteem which fed my depression: a never-ending cycle. The system just told me to be "medication-compliant", the only goal I had. Any other life goals were based on whether or not I was complying with my medication regime. Beaten down by the system and with no hope left I gave up, dropping out of treatment and doing nothing for fourteen years, a black hole in my life I will never get back.

Eventually I figured I had to do something. I thought about getting a job. I went to BRS (Bureau of Rehabilitation Services) hoping to get something part-time because I couldn't afford to live anymore. I went through the extensive testing that they have and was accepted, but my worker wasn't going to spend one red cent on me until I got help. She guided me to InterCommunity. To be honest with you, I wasn't real excited about going. I was skeptical due to past experiences. What was the system going to say that was different this time? Come to find out

they had some new things to say. In my first session with my therapist, she asked me what my goals were and surprisingly none of them were about being "medication compliant"! My initial goals were to get my own place (I had had to move back home because I couldn't afford to live on my own any longer), maybe get a part time job somewhere, but I wasn't sure who would hire me, and possibly get a friend or two. Through partnering with providers and peers, having goals that I wanted to work on, and meeting other people who had been successful in their recovery, I have been able to not only meet my goals, but exceed them in ways I never could have imagined in my first session.

Today, I've been working full-time for 6 ½ years, am no longer on disability, I'm married, I have more friends than I can find enough time to spend with, and I'm giving back the best I know how because I'm grateful for what I have. It took the system changing in order for me to change. In my current occupation I see how things like supportive housing, peer supports, and the opportunity to pursue desired social roles and other opportunities of a person's choosing help move people down the path of recovery.

In the wake of the Newtown tragedy, we should be thoughtful about how we approach mental health care reform in Connecticut. Knee-jerk reactions can cause more harm than good. Let's partner to bring about positive change that increases hope, respects personal choice and meets people where they're at instead of where we want them to be. Please don't send us back to the dark ages. Let the Recovery model, an evidence-based practice; guide your decisions as a committee. It works! Thank you for your time.