

Testimony before the Public Health Committee
Regarding: Operational Practices and Procedures of Whiting Forensic Division of CVH
Jeffrey Santos
November 13, 2107

Good afternoon Senator Gerratana, Senator Somers, Representative Steinberg and members of the Committee.

Thank you for your service on my behalf and the behalf of others affected by the horrendous negative aspects of the mental health services system in Connecticut. My name is Jeffrey Santo, a resident of Norwalk, Connecticut and I vote. I have been living with depression for almost as long as I can remember...

On December 2, 2008, I was arrested and charged with "Threatening in the 2nd degree" which is a "Class A Misdemeanor". I know this statement may seem unrelated to mental health but I can assure you it will become relevant in a moment. In 2007, when I lost my job, keeping up with my bills was impossible, especially my mortgage. On a phone call from my loan servicer I had gotten quite heated and I just before I slammed the phone down, I yelled, "You would not care if I burned this house to the ground or put a bullet in my head, just as long as you get your dammed money!"

About three hours later, I received another phone call. This time it was from the Ridgefield Police Department. They informed me that I needed to turn myself in. The accusation made against me was that I had threatened to go to the bank and shoot someone. To shorten the story, I am going to skip to the part where the public defender I was eventually assigned had a very different idea on a defense than I did. He wanted me to enter a guilty plea and accept a deal for probation. I wanted a trial because I firmly believed there was more than enough "reasonable doubt."

I was steadfast in my position that I was innocent and wanted to protect my record. The public defender's office sent me for an evaluation. The end result was that I was found not competent, citing that I was being unable or unwilling to aid in my own defense. I was then sentenced to 60 days at Whiting Forensic on the Connecticut Valley Hospital campus. Even though I was sent only for competency restoration, I found myself on a unit where some people had a history of violence - one that still stands out in my mind was a man serving time with seven counts of "felony sexual assault." The staff at Whiting treated us all the same: in their eyes we were all guilty, dangerous and crazy. If you tried to stand up for yourself, they reminded you who was in charge. They were!

One of their favorite things to do at night was every 15 minutes they would perform a bed check. The staff was required to make sure no one was missing, that was the only stated reason for the check. However, some of them would use their flashlights and wave the beam back and forth across our eyes in an effort to keep waking us up. To this day, in a completely dark bedroom, I still have moments where I could swear to you I see flashes of light when I know that it is impossible. I walked into Whiting for "competency restoration" and left with nothing more than severe trauma that still affects the way I sleep almost **eight** years later.

The State of Connecticut paid \$60,000.00 for this to happen, and what truly adds insult to injury was what happened when I returned to the courtroom. I informed my public defender that my point of view had not changed and I still wanted to take this to a trial. He said, "Then the situation has not changed. If you do not accept the plea deal, I will recommend that you be returned to Whiting for another 30 days."

While I was at Whiting, I took note of at least one other person on my unit that happen to be there for "competency restoration". His story was similar to mine - right down to being represented by the public defender's office. My second day on the unit at Whiting, I told my story to the unit psychiatrist. Afterwards, he told me that, in his judgement, I should not have been sent there. But he could not send me home, however, because I was court ordered to be there.

If I take my time at Whiting and add it to the time spent there by the other individual (also there for competency restoration reasons) a bigger picture begins to come into focus. I can tell you that, at \$1,000 per day, the state paid approximately \$150,000 for two people, because in the final result their lawyers did not want to work with the clients the court assigned to them.

At the end of this ordeal, I only wonder how many programs all over the state could have been saved or fully funded if waste like this was addressed. As a peer in recovery who uses DMHAS services, I am asking that you take a closer look at the State of Connecticut's mental health system. I am not asking for more money. I am asking that the money we are spending be put into the hands of the people who will use it wisely and know where it is needed most. Thank you.

