

**Testimony before Task Force to Study the Provision of Behavioral Health Services for Young Adults
January 14, 2014**

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Age: 27

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To the Members of the Task Force to Study the Provisions of Behavioral Health Services for Young Adults - my name is Michaela I. Fissel and I am a young person in long-term recovery from a primary diagnosis of bipolar disorder from Windsor, Connecticut.

I would like to begin by saying thank you - thank you for inviting us to share our perspective as young people who are the recipients of behavioral health services within our state.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many advocates around the state that took a lead in getting us to the table. Such as, Advocacy Unlimited, NAMI - Connecticut, Keep the Promise Coalition, DMHAS, and DCF. Without their support, we acknowledge, that we wouldn't be here today.

Personally, I view the delay in bringing our voice to the table as a misjudgment in our ability or capacity to join the conversation. I say this because that is how it appears, or can be interpreted, by the public. It is safe to say that by not including the target population, that you are making decisions for, in the discussion directly, then essentially you are contributing to the stigma.

Often, those around us judge us do judge our ability, and false inferences are made. Specifically because we are not only young, so how can we understand, but we are also "mentally ill" so how can we comprehend. Those conclusions are just not true, and it is unfortunate that we have yet to be granted the platform to actively combat those stereotypes.

Regardless, I am thankful for today, so I am going to share a little about what my experiences have been to provide you background as to how I not only achieved recovery, but how I am able to sit here before you today as an empowered, capable, and passionate advocate for bringing the young person's perspective to the planning table.

In my life, I achieved all of the negative outcomes associated with mental illness. I have been homeless, abused drugs, had an unplanned pregnancy, have been arrested, and I have experienced suicide attempts. I'm sure that you all have pictures of that type of person in your mind and so I will not belabor you with the gory details of my personal story.

But, it is important that you know how I got into recovery and why people say to me that they don't believe that I have struggled with a serious mental illness. Well, the thing is, someone sold me on recovery.

This occurred when I was at CCSU and I had my final acute psychiatric break. For me, this meant that I attempted suicide, I was hospitalized, I was discharged, and I had no idea what was going on. No one gave me information on what to expect, except take your meds and go to therapy.

Thankfully, I was connected to the Supported Education program at CCSU during a random conversation with someone who I happened to feel comfortable enough with to disclose my challenges and who happened to know that Supported Education was offered at the University. Through this recommendation I was connected with Lila Coddington and the Supported Education Program.

Given my experience with Supported Education, I would like to make a recommendation that Supported Education be implemented on every CONNSCU campus across the state. This will potentially take a formalized agreement between the CONNSCU Board of Regence and DMHAS, along with cross funding from both systems to sustain the program.

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I make this recommendation because when I was connected with the supported education program I was connected to peer support that was not clinical in nature. I was attending enough clinically facilitated group therapies to request credit for my degree, and so I needed something that was kind of non-traditional and in a context that was normalizing.

Through peer support, I was also able to form an identity beyond my diagnosis. I was able to identify as a young person, as a college student, and as a parent - that was so empowering and really enhanced my willingness to push forward because the battle was certainly not over. Recovery takes hard work and is truly a life long process.

Through the connection with the Supported Education program, I was also granted was the opportunity to get involved. This meant that I could take all those negative experiences that I had been struggling with for far too long and put it towards something that gave back to the community.

Specifically, I was offered a part time position to assist in the organization of the 2008 Statewide Supported Education Conference. Through that opportunity, I was granted the opportunity to share my story during the conference and facilitate a student panel. At that point I was connected. I was connected to so many leaders from around the state who were shocked that young people could join the conversation.

Since that time, it has been an amazing journey - a journey that has been marked by challenges, but also the chance to rise above the circumstances of my diagnosis to live a life of self-defined purpose.

Drawing upon the six years of opportunities that I have been granted along my pathway in recovery, I offered support to the individuals who will be testifying today as young people who are in recovery from mental health and/or substance use disorders to organize and give back.

These young people have many affiliations with leaders and organizations around the state that have provided tremendous support in their recovery. Part of the next step that I see is now providing us the support that we need to formally organize as an autonomous group of young people who can contribute meaningfully to the conversation. Of course, this will only be sustainable if organizations, groups, agencies, and policy makers, endorse the establishment of a peer-run, network of young people.

As a poignant example of what we can offer as young people in recovery, I believe that by the end of today you will not only see that we are capable of joining the conversation, but you will hear from a group of amazing young people who will provide you an authentic perspective on how you can enhance the services that are already available and begin to fix our fragmented service system.