

Testimony before the Insurance and Real Estate Committee

February 26, 2008

Good morning/afternoon Senator Crisco, Representative O'Connor, and honorable members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg and I am here today to testify against SB 309, an Act Concerning Certain Health Insurance Mandates, and in support of SB 278, an Act Concerning Insurer Payment for Mental Health Residential Care.

Keep the Promise Coalition was formed in the years following the closure of two of the state's large psychiatric hospitals in the mid-1990's. It was promised that a comprehensive community-based mental health service system would be implemented. That promise has not been kept. The Keep the Promise Coalition is deeply concerned about SB 309 which would essentially gut the present mental health parity laws by eliminating reimbursement to child guidance clinics, residential treatment facilities, nonprofit community mental health centers. Nonprofit community mental health centers alone serve half the states low-income mental health needs. Eliminating these reimbursements would be disastrous, both to the state of Connecticut tax payers and to the people who receive these services.

As I stated previously, Keep the Promise was formed after the shift from institutional care to community-based care was initiated. Unfortunately, proper community-based services and supports were not properly invested in, resulting in many people living in nursing homes, prisons, homelessness, and revolving door jail and emergency room visits due to untreated or under-treated mental illness. Taxpayers should be gravely concerned. The aforementioned "de-facto treatment centers" are extremely costly: both in fiscal and human terms. Further erosion of existing community-based mental health services would be a disaster to the State of Connecticut.

In contrast, SB 278 would be a move in the right direction because it will remove insurance coverage barriers for people in need of mental health residential treatment. Barriers to proper treatment in a residential setting would only result in the need for much more costly treatment in a far more restrictive setting. Furthermore, the more restrictive settings are in a state of paralysis according to Commissioner Kirk from the Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services, further complicating the problem. SB 278 would help alleviate some of the gridlock, services would cost less to provide, and people would be served in the least-restrictive, appropriate setting if these barriers are removed.

Please do the right thing and Keep the Promise to the taxpayers and citizens of Connecticut.

Thank you for your time today.