

Before the Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2020

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) budget

H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING

JUNE 30, 2021

Good evening Senators Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jennifer Korwitz and I am also a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), NAMI Fairfield. NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut, and its local affiliates provide support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for individuals, families, and children impacted by mental health conditions.

My name is Jennifer Korwitz and I am a registered voter in Westport; as well as a member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

I am here to testify in regards to the proposed budget for the Department of Social Services; specifically, the cuts to the Medicare Savings Program.

Medicare is a program that saves lives! It continues to save mine. By taking it away or cutting it drastically as you are proposing to do - which to me seems like the same thing - because many people will lose what keeps them alive and able to see the doctors they need to see, so please don't cut it! Cutting Medicare will prevent people from getting the help they need in time to be effective. Medicare helps many people who suffer from mental illness as well as many other diseases across our great state who depend on Medicare to pay their bills. It helps me and my patients see doctors, get medications and have access to therapies that might otherwise be unavailable to us, such as: intense out patient therapy, talk therapy, physical therapy, and just seeing a general practitioner! Without the coverage offered by Medicare the people on it don't thrive - they die. Cutting it would be a huge mistake!

I was diagnosed very young with mental illness, only 8 years old. And I was lucky. I was covered by my mom's private insurance from her job from the Greenwich, CT, which she worked for. Then tragedy struck my family and the lowest point of my life happened - we lost my my mom to a stroke! I lost her insurance over night. I was 24! Thank g-d I was able to get Medicare quickly and when I needed it through disability! I was able to continue life saving therapies that alone with almost no support other than my mental health professionals and my husband saved my life. The therapies I have to undergo are life changing and enable me see my self worth think I have none.

The services I take full advantage of include: seeing my general practitioner doctor regularly, going to a dentist, getting a vision test, Behavioral Therapy in multiple forms, neurology exams, hospital stays, medical taxis, help paying for medications, psych er visits, regular er visits, and more. Without this program and others like it, I could not the afford care I need.

However there is two areas that is in dire need of more funding: 211 crisis and respite homes! I was referred to a respite home for the mentally ill after being the hospital and yes this service is covered. However, the nearest respite home to me is in New Haven Ct. not only that but it took 2 months for me to get a bed and then I could stay 10 days! We need more places for those like to me stay for respite and for longer periods of time! Hospitals are now referring to respite more and more but they are less and less available plus there are too few of them around! We need more!

The other issue I mentioned was 211 crisis line. In Fairfield country, where I live you can call 211 crisis line and ask for a crisis council to come out to your home, however there's a huge catch... they are NOT available after 4 pm any day, and no weekend or hold hours! I know one thing, when I'm in crisis it's usually not when my therapist is available to chat or holding office hours...so having 211 available after 4 pm for crisis and on weekends and holidays is super important! I have called multiple times and been told that only if I need a doctor is there someone there to chat with. Usually I'm in a counselor not a doctor! And/or I need someone to help de-escalate something at my house which is why I call 211 not 911! If I called 911 things would only get worse. So I am begging you to increase the man power and the hours in this area so there is help when I or anyone else calls. This service saves lives, by de-escalating things. If the police get involved people get more ramped up and things only get worse for everyone. Please, hear my plea, for this area that needs desperate improvement as well as respite homes!

Please don't cut the Medicare Savings program any further. Please restore the cuts to the Medicare Savings Program and protect those out there that need it. I urge you from personal and professional history not to cut these vital funds. These funds may just be slices to a pie to you at times, but every day they are lifelines to me. They keep me going. Thank you for this opportunity to speak and share my lived experience with you about what this would mean to me.

I understand the state's continuing fiscal challenges and the difficult decisions facing legislators and I appreciate that the Governor has flat-funded and not significantly cut the DMHAS budget. At the same time, certain state services and supports must be prioritized because of the increasing needs for services and the greater health care and human costs resulting from short-term funding cuts. I am asking you to consider increasing the funding for DMHAS behavioral health services, for related housing supports, and for services for high-need individuals in the DHMAS' budget.

I support the following items in the Governor's budget proposal:

- The additional \$280,880 for private nonprofit providers to reflect the impact of minimum wage increases on their costs.
- The Housing Supports/Services maintained at \$23 million for FY 21.
- The \$3 million dollars in new funding to fund community placements for individuals at Connecticut Valley Hospital who are ready for discharge. This funding would support twenty placements during fiscal year 2021. The funding would cover both rental subsidies and funding for wraparound services and supports.
- The Young Adults Services that are maintained at levels of the enacted budget, \$78 million in FY 21.
- The maintaining of the Managed Service System, (Federal) Grants for Substance Abuse Services, and (Federal) Grants for Mental Health Services line items; that all help fund NAMI Connecticut's work. work at NAMI Connecticut.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Korwitz