

## Testimony of Skyler J. Rivera in front of Appropriations Committee

### In favor of Bill HB5005-DMAHS Budget 2-21-2020

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and respective members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Skyler Rivera. I live and vote in West Hartford, Connecticut.

I am involved with Advocacy Unlimited, Inc., which is a statewide, peer-led, organization that is dedicated to improving the wellbeing and outcomes for individuals who experience mental health and co-occurring disorders ([www.advocacyunlimited.org](http://www.advocacyunlimited.org)).

I currently work for Join Rise be, a peer-run emerging adult initiative dedicated to making the opportunity of recovery available to all young people across the state of Connecticut. We believe that recovery is achieved through a focused determination to fully engage in the process of rising above circumstance and living a life of self-defined purpose.

I am here today to testify in support of the Governor's proposed budget. Specifically, I will speak to the DMHAS budget.

Fundamentally, there is a need to reconsider the basic assumptions that our system of care and budget have been designed around. This is the belief that people who experience mental health challenges are disabled and will be dependent on services for the rest of their lives. This assumption directly contradicts the possibility of recovery and makes it impossible to decrease dependence on publicly funded mental health care. Possibly, it is time to restructure the fundamental design of our mental health service system and begin to look beyond the clinical paradigm through re-allocation of funding towards supports that provide pathways out of dependency.

As you consider the budget, I ask that you protect funding for peer recovery services, and ask that you encourage DMHAS to expand funding for supports beyond clinical intervention. Peer recovery services have growing evidence to support the long term benefits, while holistic approaches to mitigating stress is also effective.

I ask you to expand funding for peer recovery services within the DMHAS budget because peer support is invaluable to the mental health community.

For the past 9 years I have been going through the mental health system. It has been a tiresome journey not only for me but my mom who has supported me through all the pain. She is part of the Department Of Corrections and I hear stories about how people my age are in and out of jails because they are not supported the way that they ask to be.

A lot of problems are attributed to mental health and due to the fact that communities don't have a lot of resources for young adults. In my community within West Hartford I find mental health a difficult subject. The town is so set on bringing in wealthy people and being a mini-city that it feels as though they don't care about the people that are currently there. For such a prosperous town I have had to go to a lot of places other than West Hartford for help and support and I fear this is a common trend throughout Connecticut.

That being said I truly believe we need more opportunities in our local communities that aren't as big as Hartford, Bridgeport or Stamford. These opportunities should be innovative, and grounded in a peer-support model. Even if it's once a month groups or outreach events that involve being outside just talking to others and hanging out with other young adults, that would be a vast improvement and a step in the right direction.

The young adult groups that I have been a part of have grown me into the person I am today. Group settings where you use your own stories and experiences have opened me up to become a trusting and honest person. This has given me the ability to become a young adult warm line operator and to hear from these young adults who feel like misfits and don't feel welcome in everyday life.

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Through the Statewide Young Adult Warmline, we have one caller who continues to be let down by the current system and lack of supportive resources. There needs to be more options available to young adults because this is the time in our lives that will set the pillars for the future. My generation is tired of the angst and hopelessness we often feel because the lack of relatable and available services.

To summarize I believe there should be greater resources invested in peer recovery resources available for my generation, and alternatives to clinical treatment should be more readily accessible outside of clinical settings. We deserve a fair chance in this difficult thing called life, and it is unjust to impose the assumption that we are less than or disabled simply because we have struggled with emotional distress or devastating circumstances growing up.

Having the ability to help other young adults through our own adventures can save lives and grow the next generation of leaders. There are deeper discussions that can be taken up as we consider the outcomes we expect for 719,335 of our neighbors, friends, and family members who, like myself, my mother and all the people I have befriended within mental health communities have experienced the symptoms of a mental health challenge within their lifetime.