

**Testimony in Opposition to Section 2 of SB 1 AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC**

**Public Health Committee  
March 17, 2021**

Dear Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee: My name is Billy Bromage. I am a registered voter in New Haven, in the 10<sup>th</sup> Senate district and the 92<sup>nd</sup> House district. I am providing testimony in opposition to Section 2 of SB1: An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic.

I have worked in the field of mental health and substance use in Connecticut for 20 years. I am strongly opposed to Section 2 which would grant the Department of Public Health authority to regulate the role of peer support workers. Throughout my career, I have worked alongside many peer support workers, and I think the proposal in Section 2 is incredibly ill-considered. I would equate it to giving a young Duke Ellington a piece of sheet music and mandating him only to play that for the remainder of his musical career. I will explain what I mean.

Peer support workers are often the person who understands a situation most deeply, and they can therefore be the best allies for someone who is in crisis or is struggling with mental health or substance use challenges. I have seen peer support workers connect in transformative ways that were inaccessible to other service providers. I have heard dozens of people in recovery from mental health and/or substance use say emphatically that if not for a given peer support worker, and the creativity and flexibility that worker applied to “meet me where I’m at”, they would be in a much worse situation. It is absolutely clear to me that trusting their instincts and the relationships they have formed, and to not being unnecessarily constrained, is essential to their unique form of support for people in recovery. The current support that mentors and supervisors play is more than sufficient, in my experience, to ensure the responsible and safe work of peer support workers.

I have been a social worker for 9 years. As a member of a profession that has its licensure regulated by the Department of Public Health, I am fully aware of the homogenizing effect that the restrictions of that process place on our ability to fully support people in their healing journey. We have become rightly mistrusted by many people in recovery, partially due to social workers’ avoidance of taking risks that might be required to fully help someone for fear of “losing my license”. While the dice have been cast in the case of social workers, it would be a fatal mistake for the Public Health Committee to consign peer workers to the same fate, and simultaneously strip the heart and special effectiveness out of one of the most vital supports for people struggling with mental health and substance use in Connecticut.

I would also like to express my support for Section 7 of SB1. I think that it is absolutely necessary to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine racial disparities in public health. The scope of the problem across our state requires a bold, representative, and well-organized response.

Thank you for your time in considering this testimony.