

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
March 2 , 2021
DMHAS BUDGET HEARING
H.B. No. 6439
Dyana Hagen

Good morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Dyana Hagen, and I am a registered voter in Tolland. I am the interim Co-Chair for the Keep the Promise Coalition, a manager for Intercommunity's Common Ground Learning Center and social rehabilitation club, and a social worker.

I am here to testify regarding **H.B. No. 6439, the DMHAS budget and how it affects non-profits.**

This past year has been a nightmare for all of us. I've suffered grief and loss of loved ones, my routines, and my relationships as much as anyone out there. I lost my Dad in March. The social club I manage had to close and isolate making me worried about the wellness and stability of its members. My niece who signed up in March as a traveling nurse at Yale got Covid last June, and I nursed her back to health. My 80-year-old mother is now living with me because she cannot live alone. We are the lucky ones. I am lucky. You are lucky. I may have isolated, but I did with the family that lives with me and cares about me- in a house with a yard- not a box of a studio apartment in an urban impoverished area. Many vulnerable people who are living with disabilities and mental challenges live alone.

DMHAS social rehab clubs looked the pandemic in the face and got creative on lockdown. We taught people who didn't even have smart phones or Wi-Fi, how to get onto zoom starting in April. We empowered them to know that they weren't alone. We made home-made masks when you couldn't find any, and we sent care packages of puzzles, word finds, playing cards and hand sanitizer. Whatever they needed, we helped them. We met safely in the park when we could have small groups with social distancing, screenings and masks. We started hybrid groups in June, well before the schools did. The job was harder and busier every day. I have yet to deal with my own grief.

Many who were homeless were able to receive temporary housing due to the pandemic. What is going to happen to them when this pandemic wanes? There are wait lists an arm-lengths long right now for human services for people who have never needed them before, and there will be more. The

Community Support workers are living on salaries created over 10 years ago and have been working hard to accommodate when tasks were more difficult with so many public services closed.

Everyone talks about the police, the health care, the first responders, the mail carriers and grocery store clerks being on the front line, and God bless them all! Rarely, do you ever hear about the heroic acts of social workers. We de-escalate, we solve, we resolve, we help people with their basic human needs, we cry with them and listen to atrocious histories and empower people to overcome them, learn from them, and find peers that understand them. We keep them connected while reintroducing them to housing, occupational skills, social skills, employment and citizenship within the communities.

The gratitude is huge for the minimalist thing within this population of Connecticut. Those who may not have family, or where the family was generationally oppressed due to race. They deserve to know that someone cares. They know that the DMHAS social clubs and non-profits do and they tell us how much we "saved" them during this pandemic.

Social workers will be on the front lines for years following the trauma of this pandemic after being traumatized by it themselves. Before this pandemic, many human service workers had to work two jobs, or get food and energy assistance to pay their bills because they are becoming vulnerable too- living paycheck to paycheck after the \$461 million in cuts over the past decade.

If you do not increase the DMHAS budget, who will you get to do this work? What happens if more non-profits have to close or can't find workers, especially with the increase of the minimum wage? What will our communities look like when many people are evicted with no place to go? How many people will go hungry and homeless with such a disconnect to resources and the qualified person to help them is now working at Subway? How many people won't get their medication they need for behavioral health and physical stability? How many will recede back to prison so that they have a place to call home? What will that life of hopelessness cost Connecticut compared to the cost of a life rescued from helplessness?

Please increase the funding back into DHMAS, Housing and Non-profits and include Peer Respite. This crisis is not over. We were not prepared for the pandemic, but we can prepare for the aftermath and keep Connecticut strong. Thank you for listening to my testimony and your time, and caring, and being a part of this committee.

Sincerely,
Dyana Hagen, BSW