



Disability Rights Connecticut "Connecticut's protection and advocacy system"

**846 Wethersfield Avenue
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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE POLICE TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY TASK FORCE LISTENING SESSION, SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

Good Morning. My name is Jim Welsh, Lead Investigator for DRCT. DRCT is the Protection & Advocacy System for Persons with Disabilities as designated by the Governor under Section 46a-10b of the General Statutes. I started my career with DRCT's predecessor, the Office of Protection & Advocacy, in 1981, served in the Attorney General's Office on Intellectual Disability, Mental Health and Public Health issues, served as the first Legal Director for DDS, and spent some years in private practice. My experience over the past 39 years includes working with persons with disabilities, police and emergency response and interactions, and related criminal and probate court proceedings.

Under P.A. No. 19-90 this Task Force was established with just three focus areas. The first focus area was "police officer interactions with individuals with a mental, intellectual or physical disability." PA. No. 20-1, July Sp. Sess., appropriately broadened the scope of PA No. 19-90 in the wake of the George Floyd killing, and mushroomed the focus areas for this Task Force from three (3) to twelve (12) areas. On behalf of DRCT, I want to stress that while your workload has been substantially expanded, "police interaction with persons with disabilities" still remains #1 on the List of Focus areas. I don't envy your mission but I fully expect that the disability component of Connecticut's police reform efforts will remain front and center.

My colleague, Marissa Rivera, provided some excellent testimony regarding police interaction with the Deaf Community at the September 17 Listening Session, and I urge you to review that testimony in your further deliberations.

The path we are now trying to travel, on matters of race **and** disability, requires a sea change in how we think about police and emergency response. Too often situations which call for de-escalation are exacerbated by police and emergency response. This can result not only in physical harm and lasting trauma to all concerned, but also invokes complex judicial proceedings which may not be necessary and can have awful – and unintended - consequences once unleashed. It will require new training, new capacity for emergency mental health services, new modalities of response, and a re-defining of the role of police and emergency responders to emergencies and exigent circumstances.

This Task Force adopted, on June 16, 2020, the Six Pillars of the President's (Obama) Task Force on 21st Century Policing. One of those pillars concerns "Officer Wellness and Safety". It is critical that police and other responders have access to counselling and mental health treatment, without stigma, as we proceed. Not only is Officer wellness critical for successful policing, it should promote understanding of

and empathy for persons with disabilities and substance abuse addiction. I know that this remains an important focus area for the Task Force.

Finally, I urge the Task Force to carefully consider the comments from others who have and will provide testimony. I know that Kathy Flaherty, Executive Director of the Connecticut Legal Rights Project is providing testimony today and the Task Force will benefit from her experience and insights.

Thank you for these listening sessions.