Testimony before the Office of the Healthcare Advocate
October 17, 2012

"Barriers I Encountered in the Mental Health System"

Good day. My name is Catherine Kriss and I am a proud member of the CHR Second Wind Clubhouse in Enfield, Connecticut. I have been registered in the mental health system since November, 2005. Many thanks, Office of the Healthcare Advocate, NAMI and Keep the Promise members, Carol McDaid and consumers, providers, advocates...for listening to me today.

I am so appreciative that we have this venue to speak on our experiences with barriers to the mental health system. In particular, I can relate two incidents painfully learned.

First, as some of you may know, I was honored to serve in the "Day In The Life" program, part of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board, from April 2008-June, 2012. I was not an original member of the Day In The Life Team, but was offered the opportunity by the Director, Judy Shaw, a few years after it started. As part of this Team, I was paid a certain sum of money periodically and this money, coupled with money earned at my part-time stipend position at the CHR Second Wind Clubhouse, eventually upset the equilibrium of my SSI and DSS Food Stamp benefits. Of course, I stayed in constant touch with the SSI and DSS workers, declaring any changes in income reported for the Day In The Life activity, but to no avail. On October 10, 2011, I received a letter from SSI stating that through a large overpayment retroactively, I owed them approximately $1,700, of which SSI was deducting $67.40 from my monthly SSI benefit check, starting in January 2012. Without that needed SSI money, I was compelled to live a different lifestyle than accustomed to. I managed to qualify for DSS Cash Assistance and receive enough money to barely meet my monthly rent and utility expenses.

As a result, I join the others out there that feel penalized for securing financial, emotional, and psychological opportunities in projects like the Day In The Life Team.. I undertook this opportunity to improve my mental health recovery, as I am chronically paranoid schizophrenic.
As I understand, I fully realize that I have not suffered as much as some disabled clients out there, but am curious as to the structure of how things work. I am cognizant that we, as disabled clients, are not supposed to benefit or capitalize from the system, but I am barely making ends meet and the cost of living is increasing...

The second barrier situation I experienced was a conflict with the DSS Food Stamp program -- the food stamp redetermination form. In specific, I dutifully completed my 2012 six-month redetermination form as requested and sent it certified mail one week before the due date. Through a problem with the Enfield Street Post Office and the Stamford Mail Distribution Center, my certified mail package became lodged in a bizarre mail loop going around in circles and had not been delivered yet as of the due date. In a panic, because I was extremely concerned and upset that my DSS food stamps would be terminated (as that rejection form is automatically generated days following non-receipt of the DSS redetermination form), I faxed a copy of my redetermination form package (27 pages) to the DSS office. At this point, I was doubly concerned because two forms existed and this would cause processing problems with my original redetermination form. In a previous instance, my redetermination form was lost and I received one of those rejection letters. Does this DSS rejection form have to be generated as early as it is? As upsetting as it is to receive it, I am hoping that it must be just as upsetting for DSS to send it out that early?
Whatever the case may be, I hope this form can be generated in a later, more accurate fashion. This action would help those of us in our thinking that we are not just numbers in the mental health system, but are worthwhile members of our communities.