

Statement on Proposed Milwaukee County Mental Health Oversight Board

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Contact: Barbara Beckert, Milwaukee Office Director

barbara.beckert@drwi.org 414-773-4646/414-719-1034

Today, State Representative Joe Sanfelippo and State Senator Leah Vukmir are introducing a bill to create a Milwaukee County Mental Health Board to oversee and direct the delivery and financing of mental health services in Milwaukee County. Although we have not yet seen the bill which will be introduced today, and are not endorsing a specific proposal, we do strongly endorse the need for significant improvements in mental health services in Milwaukee County, including improved oversight and accountability. We commend Rep. Sanfelippo and Senator Vukmir for their deep commitment to improving publicly funded mental health services in Milwaukee County and to ensuring that residents can access high quality, safe, recovery oriented mental health and AODA services including increased availability of community based services and supports.

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is open to considering other oversight models for delivery of mental health services in Milwaukee County, and potentially statewide. In 1991, DRW (then WI Coalition for Advocacy) filed the Joan S. v. Gudeman Lawsuit, challenging Milwaukee County's lack of community based mental health and developmental disability services. One of the recommendations that resulted from that lawsuit and was included in the Milwaukee Master Plan was to implement a mental health authority. Twenty plus years later, that recommendation has yet to move forward. Tragically, many of the other recommendations in the Master Plan which called for a major expansion of community services have yet to be implemented.

While we value the intent of this proposal and are very open to considering other oversight models, any change will require significant advocate, legal and structural review to protect consumers, ensure government agencies do not abdicate their legal and fiduciary responsibilities, and that all regulatory requirements are considered and met. In addition, we believe it could be beneficial to evaluate other oversight models that have been used in urban areas similar to Milwaukee, to identify what has worked well and could be adapted for Milwaukee, possibly through a Legislative Council Study Committee.

Most important, we need to put politics aside and demand that the needs of the consumer come first. We can and must act now to improve publicly funded mental health services in Milwaukee County, including protecting the rights of our residents to access safe, high quality mental health services. This must include significantly improved access to quality community based services, improvements in the safety and quality of inpatient services, and reducing the overreliance on traumatizing crisis, inpatient and institutional care. Ultimately, that should be the litmus test for any proposal. #

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy Agency for the State of Wisconsin, charged with protecting and advocating on behalf of individuals with mental illness to address abuse, neglect, or other violations of their rights and independently investigating instances of abuse and neglect at mental health facilities.

MADISON

131 W. Wilson St.
Suite 700
Madison, WI 53703

608 267-0214
608 267-0368 FAX

MILWAUKEE

6737 West Washington St.
Suite 3230
Milwaukee, WI 53214

414 773-4646
414 773-4647 FAX

RICE LAKE

217 West Knapp St.
Rice Lake, WI 54868

715 736-1232
715 736-1252 FAX

disabilityrightswi.org

800 928-8778 consumers & family