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Commissioner

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Respecting Individual Choice through Advance Directives

If there is one word that captures the essence of a recovery-oriented system of care, I think it would be “choice.” Since the beginning of the Consumer Empowerment Movement over 25 years ago and the Recovery Initiative we implemented over a decade ago, we have emphasized the importance of respecting the individual preferences of the persons who receive our services.

Preparing an Advance Directive is an essential way that a person can protect their individual preferences concerning health care. Advance Directives are legal documents that:

- Allow you to specify your choice of treatments, interventions, medications, etc., that you want used during times when you cannot communicate your wishes;
- Can be used to designate a person to make health care decisions for you if you cannot make them;
- Can even provide instructions concerning the care of pets, plants and possessions, when needed.

Studies have shown Advance Directives can protect the therapeutic relationships between clinicians and patients. When an Advance Directive is in place, there is no need to resort to coercive measures such as forced treatment. Recently, a CT emergency department nurse was able to calm a person whose anxiety was increasing by consulting the person’s Advance Directive and using an intervention indicated in that document. The person had stated that drawing and coloring calms her down and the nurse was able to offer that activity to her. Without the Advance Directive, the nurse would not have known how to make the space safe for the patient and might have had to resort to a more aggressive intervention.

People who use Advance Directives say they feel empowered by having a document to speak for them when they cannot speak for themselves.

Unlike crisis plans, including those written in Wellness Recovery Action Plans, Advance Directives are legal documents. As a legal document, they need to be respected by judges, conservators, clinicians and caseworkers. As a legal document, an Advance Directive must be prepared according to procedures as specified by state law.

Advance Directives are a way to “Give Voice to Your Choice.” The Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP) is partnering with the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) to expand the use of Advance Directives by the people we serve. CLRP is distributing a workbook that is used to prepare an Advance Directive, as well as training materials for persons who want to assist others with the workbook.

For more information, call CLRP at (877) 402-2299 or check out their website at www.clrp.org.

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