

Dear Co-Chairs Steinberg, Somers, Gerratana, and other esteemed members of the Public Health Committee:

Thank you for convening this hearing today. All of what you will hear me speak, and submit as testimony are incidents I have witnessed as a patient at Fairfield Hills State Hospital, and as Patient Advocate at the same facility, a few months after being discharged from the facility in 1993.

All recollections are to the best of my knowledge; these incidents are from the mid-1980s and again, as Patient Advocate from 1993 – 1995. All language that may be offensive, is said in context, exactly as I heard it. There are many stories here; a mere fraction of what I have seen and heard during my days at Fairfield Hills Hospital.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

-George Santayana

I remind you today, of these past abuses because it seems evident to me that DMHAS is the fox, and the fox cannot be trusted to guard the hen house. If DMHAS is allowed to “consolidate” the state’s five RMHBs and 13 RACs into five new RBHAOs *and* remove their advocacy, education, and community oversight function, then, we are essentially left with *no* independent oversight of DMHAS and its programs. I call on the legislature to recognize the value of independent oversight, and please not let DMHAS ignore the statutes that were put in place 40 years ago to protect our state’s most vulnerable mentally ill. Further, I recommend that DMHAS no longer oversee any evaluation of its programs, and that this function be moved to the Office of the Health Advocate.

#### **Fairfield Hills Hospital Patient – 1985-1986; 1993**

- A female patient repeatedly urinated on the furniture and it would take staff many hours (sometimes an entire shift) to clean her and give her dry clothes, and to clean the TV area. This happened on a regular basis. Even when other patients informed staff that this patient was sitting in her own urine, it would take hours for staff to act.
- This same patient repeatedly defecated in the sinks in the women’s bathroom. The excrement would be left in the sink for up to a week by staff.

[Type here]

- Staff would allow a male patient to lay blankets down on the floor of the women's bathroom and sleep/lie in a stall all day, while females were using the restroom facilities. A group of us complained to staff, and nothing was done.
- Shortly after being admitted to a unit in Canaan House, one of the mental health assistants was using very rough, and inappropriate language with me. I spoke up and let him know that his language was unprofessional. He leaned over the counter of the nurses' station and said: "Shut the Fuck up; I'm the one with the keys, and I'll talk to you however I want."
- Being restrained in four-point restraint for several hours in the middle of the Day Hall, while other patients walked around me staring at me and touching me.
- Taking a shower on Canaan 3C, while the staff did nothing to protect me from a male patient walking in on me and seeing me in complete nudity.
- One evening, a female patient from another unit returned from a Grounds pass inebriated. four Public Safety officers caught her and proceeded to kick the living heck out of her as they dragged her up the stone stairs of Canaan House. They pushed and punched her in the face while she screamed. I saw her the next day and her face was so swollen, that she could barely open one of her eyes. She came into the patient store, and so many of us were incensed, that we wrote up a petition to give to the hospital's Superintendent.
- Canaan house staff on unit 3C would wake us up at 6 AM each morning by screaming at us (Please remember, most of us were on very heavy doses of first-generation anti-psychotics which made one both very tired and have symptoms of Tardive Dyskenisia).
- Patients with grounds passes were allowed to walk "the loop" a very large path that encircled the property that comprised Fairfield Hills Hospital (FHH). One day, while walking with a "friend," he turned to me and said: "I could rape you here, and no one would ever know." I never told any staff, for fear of retribution from this particular patient.
- There was a female patient on Canaan 3C who repeatedly refused to take medication (as was her right, in the mid-1980s). One evening, the Evening shift nurse got tired of this patient refusing medication, so she summoned two Mental Health Assistants over. They forcefully pinned her to the wall. The patient was screaming and shaking her head back and forth as the nurse took pills and attempted to shove them down this woman's throat.

- There was a woman in quiet room/bedroom below me screamed all night. If it had not been for the two wonderful librarians, who plied me with books, I might have never again found sanity.
- It was very difficult to communicate with friends/family on the outside. While a patient in the mid-eighties, there was one payphone for all of the units on the floor. I was on the third floor of Canaan and would estimate that there were approximately 150 patients per floor. *One phone* for 150 patients! Friends and or family would attempt to call me over and over, until finally giving up.

### **Working at Fairfield Hills Hospital as the Patient Advocate – 1993-1995**

My admission to Fairfield Hills Hospital was a short one, in 1993. I had been very involved as a patient advocate since 1986, and there was a national movement swelling around the rights of the mentally ill during this time (mid-1980's). In Connecticut, several hundred of us had formed a group called "Connecticut Self-Advocates for Mental Health." We had all been victims of abuse at the hands of state mental health systems; most of us were from Connecticut. Soon thereafter, Connecticut began following suit of some of the more progressive states, and DMHAS began hiring people with lived experience of psychiatric institutionalization. Many of us involved were hired by DMHAS. Approximately four months after my discharge from FHH, I was doing quite well. I was told about a patient advocate position that was opening at the hospital, applied, and was chosen out of an applicant pool of approximately 30 people. My supervisor was the Superintendent of the hospital – Dr. Andy Phillips.

My first day of work was quite an amazing event. After meeting with in Human Resources, getting an ID, being fingerprinted, etc., Dr. Phillips took me to each of the units in both Cochran and Canaan House. Once shown my office (a former quiet room) in Canaan House I began walking around. It was amazing to see the number of staff "freaking out," because I had a set of keys

Once I had the keys, and it was clear to all that I was a staff member (Human Services Trainee), I theoretically had access to all of the buildings on the grounds. Most of my time was spent with patients in Canaan House and Cochran House, as most of the buildings had been shut down. I witnessed and/or was involved in many disturbing situations:

- Since I was the new kid on the block, and a complete novelty, I had to deal with many situations for which there were no parameters already set.
- One of the first, was when I was accused of bringing Dunkin' Donuts coffee to a female patient in Canaan House—sneaking up the back stairs, and supposedly opening the door to hand it off to her. Considering the position I was in, I figured I had to work 110

[Type here]

percent harder than everyone else. In addition, I was on probation for my first six months of work, and I imagined my work was being scrutinized very closely. On top of that, there were many staff that didn't like the idea of a Patient Advocate being around. Anyway, after the coffee hand-off happened a second time, I was again blamed. (Mind you, I worked day shift, and this was all happening on evening shift). Then things got *really* interesting. One Monday I came to work all to hear in Morning Meeting that this female patient's male benefactor had taken her to Vermont for a weekend ski trip.

- I was a member of the union – AFSCME. One day, I got a phone call from the head AFSCME representative at Fairfield Hills. She screamed at me for at least fifteen minutes. She called me every pejorative word you can think of, and accused me of also being a spy for the administration. I was quite shaken up by being so verbally abused, and went to one of the few colleagues who liked me, sobbing in her office for a good fifteen minutes. Ironically enough, AFSCME was the union that was supposedly representing and protecting me.
- Clinical staff telling me that I couldn't be on treatment teams because I had a "diagnosis."
- The psychiatrist from one of the units on the first floor of Canaan House screaming at me and insulting me at Canaan 1C unit meetings.
- Going to Canaan 1C, telling patients that I was having a meeting, and every single patient on the unit would come to the hour-long discussion. Meanwhile, staff, would be gathered in the nursing station laughing at us. This would happen week after week.
- Two months after beginning my position as patient advocate at Fairfield Hills Hospital, it was Christmas time. (Most patients had no visitors, and didn't expect to get a Christmas gift.) I had a friend who worked for a PR firm, and he told me that he would be able to get 300 stuffed Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeers who's noses lit when you pressed their ear. When I called Material Management and told them when to expect the delivery, I was told by a friendly colleague that the only way that they would deliver the boxes of Rudolphins was to "bribe" the Materials Management staff with a case of Rudolphins for their friends and family. On the day that the stuffed Rudolphins were to be delivered, only one staff member volunteered to help me distribute all of the Rudolphins to the units in Canaan and Cochran House. I was grateful for the assistance of this lovely nurse; it took us five hours to deliver all the Rudolphins, and every single patient at Fairfield Hills Hospital received one.
- Shortly before the closing of Fairfield Hills Hospital, I was visiting patients on a unit on the third floor of Canaan House. As Patient Advocate, I had received numerous complaints about patient belongs (mostly cigarettes) disappearing. When I went to the unit, the staff informed me that it was a colleague of theirs, one of the unit's social

[Type here]

workers, who was taking patient cigarettes. Now, I know that this may not sound like a big deal, but when you have next to nothing, or even nothing, a few packs of cigarettes, or even a carton of cigarettes is like gold. When I asked the social worker's colleagues why they never reported this, they told me that he was never there doing his job, and that even they had given up looking for him to carry out his functions as a social worker.

- From my observations, it was mostly the Rehabilitation and some of the nursing staff who cared about the patients at Fairfield Hills Hospital. I wish to honor the following who were angels on earth during a time in hell:
  - Chris
  - Steve
  - Nancy
  - Marcy
  - Jackie
  - Sue
  - Michelle
  - Rose
  - Andy

Thank you for your time. Should you wish to contact me to ask further questions or have ongoing discussion, please contact me at the SWRMHB. I am on the Board of Directors. The website is: <[healthymindsct.org](http://healthymindsct.org)>

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Buchsbaum  
November 13, 2017

[Type here]