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To: Senate Committee on Health Care

RE: Senate Bill 529, Relating to community health

My name is Shaunte' Duron-Okotete, and I have been a Peer Support Specialist (PSS) since 2013. I am testifying today in strong support of SB 529, which addresses critical barriers facing Traditional Health Workers (THWs), including Peer Support Specialists and Family Support Specialists (PSS/FSS).

The core requirement to become a Peer Support Specialist is lived experience—whether through one's own mental health journey or supporting a loved one. This means that nearly every PSS has, at some point, been in a position of feeling lesser-than in the presence of clinical professionals—whether that be a therapist, psychiatrist, or program administrator. Many of us have experienced disempowerment within the very systems we now work to improve.

Having PSS require clinical supervision in order to bill for services places them under the authority of the very professionals who have historically held some form of power over their lives.—creates a harmful dynamic. It places those of us tasked with creating system change and advocating for individuals in need under the very structures we are working to transform. This is not just a logistical issue but an ethical one—one that erodes the foundation of mutuality, trust, and empowerment that Peer Support is built upon.

When I started as a Youth Peer Support Specialist in a residential treatment center, I was fortunate to have an experienced Family Support Specialist (FSS) as my supervisor. This peer-led supervision protected me from being "therapized" or disempowered in my role. It gave me the freedom to speak up, challenge harmful practices, and advocate for real change—all without the fear of being labeled "too unstable" or "too emotional" by a clinician in charge.

However, after several years, a new program director decided that PSS could not be trusted without clinical oversight—not because of any performance issues, but because we were seen as "mentally ill" and inherently unfit to operate without a therapist's authority.

As we predicted, this shift:

- Stripped PSS and FSS of their power, reducing them to token roles in their organizations.
- Silenced authentic advocacy, as clinicians became the gatekeepers of what was "appropriate" to say.
- Undermined the mission of Peer Support, prioritizing clinical control over lived experience expertise.

After five years, I left that organization and moved into systems work, helping Coordinated Care Organizations (CCOs) manage THW contracts and programs. Over the past 12 years, I have seen the same systemic issues continue:

- PSS and other THWs struggle with limited contracting opportunities, unfair payment models, and a lack of recognition for their expertise.
- Supervision structures remain rigid and inappropriate for the unique role of Peer Support.
- The system continues to demand that Peer Support fit into a clinical model rather than allowing it to operate as intended.

SB 529 is a necessary step forward in ensuring that Peer Support Specialists and other THWs can work effectively, be fairly compensated, and remain true to the principles of our profession. It does this by:

1. Expanding direct contracting opportunities, reducing administrative barriers for PSS and ensuring financial sustainability.
2. Reforming supervision requirements to allow non-clinical supervisors with relevant experience to oversee THWs—ensuring that Peer Support remains peer-led.
3. Improving reimbursement models to fairly compensate THWs and prevent burnout and workforce shortages.

Supervision, payment structures, and system barriers should not be the reason Peer Support Specialists leave the field. Many of us are in this work because we believe in it—because we have lived it. But we cannot be effective if we are continually placed under the same power structures that once silenced us.

I urge you to support SB 529 so that future Peer Support Specialists and Traditional Health Workers don't have to keep fighting the same battles we've been fighting for over a decade.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Peer Support Specialist