

## Written-Only Testimony Opposing HB 2356

Before: House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development  
Representative Les Mason, Chair

Provided by: Susan Crain Lewis, President/CEO  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Mason and members of the Committee. My name is Susan Crain Lewis, and I am the President/CEO of Mental Health America of the Heartland, an advocacy organization based in Kansas City that serves the Eastern portion of the state of Kansas with advocacy, education and support services for persons with mental illness, and the persons who work with and care for and about them, whether in a professional or personal role.

MHA of the Heartland has never been a state use law vendor and has no plans to become one, but we do care very much about discrimination against people with mental illness. We employ a large number of persons with mental illness on our staff and have placed peer support workers in other social service agencies. As a result, we are acutely aware of the role work plays in recovery from mental illness. Work is very often a key force in the process of a person's recovery, rather than an end point as people have long believed.

As you are no doubt aware, the symptoms and impairments related to mental illness, like those of all chronic illnesses, range from mild to severe. They may vary over the course of an illness and in between and among individuals. The Mental Health America of the Heartland mission encompasses all illnesses and all levels of functioning.

HB 2356 might sound like it is crafted to help create jobs for people with mental illness, but at the end of day all it ends up doing is picking winners and losers. In the case of people with mental illness, HB 2356 mostly makes losers. It is very limited and will only serve one very narrow subset of people, those with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness (SPMI). This category represents less than 5 percent of the estimated 25 percent of people who live with mental illness.

As the bill is written currently, there is an incentive that is inherently discriminatory. The language on Page 3 would give certified businesses the same incentive to hire any person with a disability, not just those who are eligible for HCBS services or have the diagnosis of "severe and persistent mental illness."

This language must be deleted—if someone meets the social security definition of disability (as contained starting on line 26, sub A), then an employer should have the same incentive to hire that person as any other person who meets that definition of disability.

The benefits to the state will be the same for all people with disabilities who would qualify under this bill if this language is removed—every dollar that would be covered under private health insurance offered under HB 2356 would save Medicaid a dollar. Further, thanks to mental health parity, private health insurance programs are far more likely to cover mental health services. Thus, state taxpayers would greatly benefit from language that expands the bill to include anyone with a mental illness that qualifies as a disability under section A (lines 26-29) who is hired under this bill. Much of their mental health care could be covered under private health insurance, saving taxpayers from footing the bill under Medicaid.

For these reasons, I urge you to not pass this bill unless you remove lines 33-43 on page 3 of the bill. Thank you for your attention and your consideration of this request.