Disability Rights California

California's protection and advocacy system

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October 9, 2009

Andrew Poat
Chairman
Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission
1300 17th Street, Suite 1000
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Time Limit for Public Comment at MHSOAC Meetings

Dear Chairman Poat,

Our agency understands that there is a proposal to limit the public comment period at MHSOAC meetings to two minutes when this has not been the practice OAC staff has found. Public funds are directed to meet the objectives of the MHSA and as such, the public should have a meaningful opportunity to speak their concerns. Individuals who have a disability may need more time to speak than two minutes and may instead require a reasonable amount of time to speak.

We support the principles outlined by the Client and Family Leadership Committee on how public comment should be valued at MHSOAC meetings. That Committee's initial report was presented at the MHSOAC meeting of September 24th, 2009 and is relevant to the vote on this issue that may take place at the MHSOAC meeting scheduled for October 22nd.

Disability Rights California supports a *minimum* of three minutes per speaker. To support this, OAC staff found that out of the nine similar commissions surveyed, five of them allowed speakers 3-5 minutes; two did not specify a time limit; and only one of nine allowed a maximum of 2-3 minutes.

In some cases and depending on the circumstances, perhaps the Chairman may use his discretion to limit public comment to less than three minutes but that decision should be exercised with caution since that may reduce the value of receiving public comment itself. Our agency is a founding member of REMHDCO which has written a similar letter that was addressed to you. Its members have been present at OAC meetings over the past two years.

Additionally, our agency supports having two general public comment periods, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In some cases, at the end of the day, there may not be a full Commission seated who can hear the public comments. Stakeholders may have traveled a long distance to give public comment and by having only a single comment period, their concerns may not be fully heard and considered.

Sincerely,

Suzanna Gee
Associate Managing Attorney