

Testimony of Steve Bender
Executive Director, 1199 Training & Upgrading Fund
Regarding Raised Bill #1062

Education Committee Public Hearing - February 13, 2007

Good afternoon Rep. Fleischman, Sen. Gaffey, and members of the committee. I am Steve Bender, Executive Director of the 1199 Training Fund. My organization provides educational programs and career counseling for nursing home workers who are members of the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199. I am asking you to support Bill #1062, "*AN ACT CONCERNING LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSE PROGRAMS IN VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOLS,*" which will create three new part-time LPN programs in Connecticut.

The need and demand for part-time LPN programs in Connecticut is enormous. As you know, we are in the midst of a nursing shortage. Connecticut nursing homes have a LPN vacancy rate of over 17%, which translates to over 400 positions that are vacant statewide. It is not uncommon for nursing homes to pay sign-on bonuses of thousands of dollars to steal each other's nurses. In addition to this, close to 50% of the nurses in Connecticut will retire by 2010.

Currently, only two of the 11 LPN programs operated by the state's Voc-Tech system are part-time. These are in Middletown and Danbury. The others are all full-time, five day a week programs, which make it virtually impossible for working adults to attend.

One major change has occurred since last year, when this bill made it out of your committee but didn't make it through Appropriations. Private, for profit training schools have begun opening up LPN programs, full and part-time, all over the state. Even though the tuition for these programs is close to \$30,000, they are all filling up because people don't feel that they have another choice.

People, usually of modest means, are being forced to take out huge student loans in order to pay their way through such programs, and if a person is not able to complete the program, they are then stuck with an enormous loan to repay and nothing to show for it.

Even for those that do complete the program, it is awful for them to have these huge loans to repay when they could have paid about \$5000 for a comparable, state supported program.

The two private schools that offer part-time LPN programs, New England Technical Institute and Stone Academy, have a total of 230 slots, and a third, Porter and Chester Institute, is hoping to open part-time LPN slots later this year. Compare that to the voc-tech schools that offer a total of only 50 part-time slots.

One of our members, a CNA named Oliver Wilson, wrote a letter to you yesterday, Rep. Fleischmann, to share her story. She couldn't be here to testify today, but I'd like to share a bit of what she wrote:

"I am a struggling mother of two, trying to balance work and school because I just cannot afford to go to school full-time. I work 3rd shift at St. Mary's Home in West Hartford, and am currently taking pre-requisite classes at Goodwin College in East Hartford. The tuition there is more expensive than UCONN.

I am worried about being put on a waiting list for the nursing program, however, so I am planning to uproot my family next fall to attend a nursing program in Massachusetts. I will attend school there during the week and return home on weekends..."

Adults going to school are extremely serious about it. At the Training Fund we deal with hundreds of CNAs, and other nursing home workers, every year who have a strong desire to go into nursing, and their enthusiasm and abilities are undeniable. But there are not a lot of opportunities for them to go to school while working and supporting their families.

If given the right opportunities and supports, working adults can play a big role in helping deal with the state's nursing shortage. Bill #1062 is an easy way the State can start addressing the nursing crisis right away, with people who are already in the health care field. I hope that you'll take this into consideration. Thank you.