



**Testimony of the Connecticut Children's Medical Center
to the Public Health Committee
regarding HB 6921, An Act Concerning Behavioral Health
March 16, 2007**

Senator Handley, Representative Sayers, members of the Public Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Paul Dworkin, and I am Physician-in-Chief at the Connecticut Children's Medical Center (CCMC) and Chair of Pediatrics at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. I am here to speak to you about House Bill 6921, An Act Concerning Behavioral Health. I applaud this committee for introducing this bill and dedicating this hearing to an issue that is critical to a large and growing number of Connecticut families.

The extent to which children in acute psychiatric crisis are currently "stock piled" in busy emergency departments and pediatric inpatient units has received much attention. Despite several years of discussion involving the legislative and executive branches of the government and multiple state agencies, little progress has been made in addressing this crucial issue. As a consequence, children, in alarming numbers, are housed in settings that are neither therapeutic nor safe, given the magnitude of their behavioral needs. Furthermore, the placement of such children has disrupted more traditional and appropriate pediatric services, consuming resources and inordinate staff time and attention.

The broad approach proposed by House Bill 6921 is very appropriate and could benefit all stakeholders who are impacted by the current crisis. CCMC and Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living recognize the magnitude of this problem and understand the extent to which the placement of such children within the emergency department setting is unsatisfactory. The need for new approaches and new models is obvious. These institutions have long partnered in the provision of emergency psychiatric services to children and adolescents.

During 2004, 2005 and 2006, an average of 1,600 children annually have visited the CCMC's Emergency Department in behavioral health crisis. In 2007, we are on pace to see 1,750 children in crisis. Not only do they come to us in large and growing numbers, many end up "stock piled" for extended periods of time. In 2006, these children represented 90 different Connecticut towns and spent a total of 1,137 nights in the Emergency Department awaiting a transfer to an appropriate psychiatric care setting. 166 of these children, about 10% of them, had to spend at least two nights waiting. This problem is completely unacceptable and it is not going to resolve itself. The system is failing these children and we must work together to implement a solution.

In carefully assessing the clinical challenges of serving this population, we have identified three critical components of an effective model. First, children in acute crisis must receive both timely medical clearance and acute psychiatric evaluation. Second, following emergency assessment and medical clearance, many children in mental health crisis require stabilization and intervention. We cannot realize staffing and clinical efficiencies when these children are held in hospital emergency departments while awaiting an appropriate disposition. Third, for patients requiring further care, we must maximize opportunities for throughput. As suggested in Section 3 of the bill, the Behavioral Health Partnership, the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Social Services must work in collaboration with community based and institutional providers to get children through the system and into care as efficiently as possible. A system that addresses these components would promote more smooth transfer of children in crisis to appropriate care settings, and would provide more appropriate transitional care if immediate disposition to that setting was not possible.

Connecticut must take significant steps now to make real changes for these children and families. I urge you to take positive action on House Bill 6921 so we can provide children and adolescents with the care they need and deserve.