

Testimony of Angelo Carrabba, MD
President, Connecticut State Medical Society
In support of revised HB 7155,
An Act Concerning a Health Care Providers Health Program
Public Health Committee
March 14, 2007

Senator Handley, Representative Sayers and members of the Public Health Committee I am Angelo Carrabba, MD, president of the Connecticut State Medical Society. On behalf of our 7,000 physician and medical student members, as well as the Coalition of Health Care Professionals, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony to you today in support of House Bill 7155 An Act Concerning a Professional Assistance Program for Health care Professionals. We support the revised language that has been submitted by the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health (DPH) for House Bill 7155. A copy of the revised language is attached.

Our Coalition worked with DPH to make what was a good bill better. I am submitting with this written testimony, the written testimony of counsel for the State Medical Society which addresses salient points of the revised language. This Bill creates a single health care professional assistance program to help physicians, dentists, nurses, physician assistants, veterinarians, and other health care professionals who have, or who are at risk of having, impairment due to substance abuse, emotional disorder or mental illness, behavioral concerns or physical illness. There are three keys to the success of this program and which make it an effective alternative to public discipline: clear parameters for eligibility, confidentiality and accountability.

The need for such a program in this state is overwhelming. Our fear is that Health care professionals currently are not seeking treatment they need for fear of losing their reputations, licenses and jobs. This program improves the likelihood that intervention will occur, professionals will obtain the help they need, and patients will continue to receive the quality of care they deserve. In addition, by having one statewide program, the standard of care for intervention will be uniform and consistent.

This bill promotes education, intervention, monitoring and accountability. Through education, the assistance program will increase the likelihood that more of our health care professionals who may be suffering from one of these serious illnesses will be identified or seek help at an earlier time in the disease process, receive early intervention, and with support and monitoring be less likely to lapse. Although health care professionals are vulnerable to chemical dependency at the same rate as the general population, health care professionals' success in recovery is far greater than that of the general population. This has been supported in multiple studies published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

In addition to being the President of the CSMS, I have been the President of the Medical Dental Staff at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center for 2 years. As a hospital administrator, I have witnessed the need for a single, statewide, confidential and

alternative to discipline program that would allow for all licensed health care professionals to apply for rehabilitation. As you have witnessed through recent public testimony, trends in medicine are focusing on a team-centered approach, where physicians, nurses, physicians assistants and others may care for one patient. The health of every member of the team is essential to delivery of quality health care to our patients. Each member of the team deserves the dignity and respect a confidential rehabilitation program provides, while ensuring that patient safety is paramount.

Patient safety is ensured by providing criteria for eligibility, development of individual rehabilitation plans, periodic reviews and monitoring. If a professional does not agree to the terms and conditions of the plan developed with a medical review committee under this bill, or does not comply with the terms and conditions of such plan, a referral must be made to the Department for investigation and appropriate action. This joint relationship with the Department becomes a strong incentive for compliance and recovery.

Accountability is repeatedly stressed throughout this bill. Medical Review Committees will ensure standards are met for evaluation, intervention and support for each health care professional. A qualified oversight committee will ensure quality assurance, not only for each professional, but also of the program-at-large. Finally, an annual audit is provided to further ensure that the requirements of this bill are being met.

One in 10 professionals will suffer from addiction over the course of his or her career. These professionals care for our loved ones. However, no confidential programs currently exist to assist all members of the health care team and especially nurses, dentists, veterinarians and other health care professionals. The punitive nature of the current system makes peers reluctant to refer their colleagues for help. H.B. 7155 as revised affords a confidential avenue for treatment that will encourage peer identification, crisis intervention, referral assistance, and support services which are essential to improving the delivery of health care in Connecticut.

On behalf of CSMS, I ask that you support Bill 7155 with the revisions submitted by the Department and Coalition.