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Sen. Handley, Rep. Sayers and Members of the Public Health Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of S.B. No.175, An Act Concerning An Appropriation for Mental Health Services in School Based Health Centers. I want to thank Sen. Prague and Representatives Malone and Olson for raising this bill, and for all the legislators who recognize that school based health centers are the answer for access to care issues for children.

My name is JoAnn Eaccarino. I am the Director of Medical Services for the 16 School Based Health Centers sponsored by Child & Family Agency serving children living in New London, Groton, and Norwich (and surrounding towns.) Maria Belval is Director of the Mental Health Services. These areas have been designated by the federal government as Medically Underserved (MUA) and Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). These designations mean that the need for services in these communities exceeds the capacity of the local community of health professionals. Add to that the number of children who live in homes where either one or both parents/caregivers are working at jobs that they cannot leave, either during the day or in the early evening, without fear of losing their jobs. For all of these reasons, the opportunity to receive medical, mental health, and dental services in school becomes clearly beneficial.

Community mental health providers who accept H.U.S.K.Y. insurance have a typical waiting list of 2-3 months. Once accepted, the family of the child then has to get the child to the outpatient site, and for some this is a transportation and cost dilemma.

The mental health needs of children are more urgent than ever and the diagnoses more complicated. We are seeing children 3 years old in our pre-school School Based Health Center in Waterford who don't want to come to school because they're being bullied. We are seeing teenagers whose best friends have been killed in horrendous accidents, or have committed suicide, or have witnessed their parents' abusiveness to each other, unable to focus in school and losing precious time to garner the knowledge and skills they need for their own future. In many of the school based health centers, mental health providers split their week between two schools, especially at the elementary level because of limited funding. Meanwhile, principals and school support personnel are begging for additional coverage. Another plus of school based care is that providers can meet with students in groups, addressing issues such as anger management or grief, thus helping the students to learn to cope with their own problem while also learning communication skills and empathy.

In summary, I urge you to pass this bill to Appropriations Committee. Children in school based health centers will receive the care they need, and the savings both in terms of future health care costs as well as the price of human suffering on society in general will be mediated.

Thank you for your consideration and action on this bill.