



Testimony on HB: An Act Concerning School Based Health Clinics and Community Based Health Centers

Rep. Sayers, Senator Handley and members of the committee. My name is Rhona Weiss and I am the program coordinator for the Branford School Based Health Centers and a Board Member of the Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers.

I welcome the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the raised bill number 7366. When I first read through this bill my first impression was that I was so pleased to see that the Connecticut legislature is seeking additional funds for the SBHC program. I viewed this bill as a major step forward in recognizing the value of our services. The possibility of expanding into new schools was frankly, exciting. I appreciate the hard work that went into this bill and on behalf of Connecticut's youth, I thank you.

Now, for my second impression of this bill. There are currently 66 Department of Public Health SBHC's that operate throughout the state. Our clinics are severely under funded. We have been forced to reduce clinical staff hours, for example in my clinic the nurse practitioners and social workers used to work 30 hours a week and now are present in the building for 25 hours a week. This reduction in clinic hours has resulted in children being turned away on days when clinical staff is not present. In many SBHC communities staff receive no health benefits, no sick time or paid vacation time. Working under these conditions is discouraging at times and we often lose quality staff due to our limited resources. The DPH funded SBHC's that currently exist are in a major financial crisis and we need your fiscal support to keep our program responsive to the needs of our communities children.

There is one section of this bill that seeks additional money for "expanding and enhancing mental health services" provided by our clinics. As I have watched the number of behavioral health referrals increase yearly, I felt encouraged by this prospect for increased funding. I had a momentary vision of increasing the social workers hours, perhaps including summer hours to meet the demand for on-going care. However, when I did the math and saw that \$500,000 would become \$7,500.00 to each of our 66 sites I recognized immediately that there would be limited impact to expand and enhance our mental health services. Section 4 of bill 7366 is a step in the right direction but it does not consider the work of the Ad Hoc Committee which demonstrated that the current funding to SBHC's is short \$190,000 to be fully operational.

I do not want to leave you with mixed messages. There really is only one message. School Based Health Centers are outstanding examples of how Connecticut cares for its

youth. Healthy children make better learners and by being on site in the schools we can diagnosis and treat our youth in a comprehensive manner incorporating the best of preventative health care and responsible medical treatment. But we can not do our best work existing within the current budget. New sites that are also under funded will fall into the same fate as we have had to endure: closing early in the school year, losing competent staff, sending away children from our doors that are seeking our care.

We welcome the opportunity of working with you to fine tune this bill so that it makes the most sense for our communities and towns. We seek to partner with you in establishing new appropriately funded School Based Health Centers and to develop funding streams that support our existing sites. Let's continue to serve as a prime example through out our country, not just our state, of a health service system that works. The future health of Connecticut's children is at stake. Let's do this right.