

Representative Caruso, Rep. Slossberg and members of the GAE Committee.

I am Pam Fields, Executive Director of the Arc of Meriden Wallingford and Board Member of CCPA. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on bill 678, an act establishing a Community Based Health and Human Service Strategy Board.

This bill is a positive step in hopefully addressing the present and long term needs of hundreds of Community Providers across the state and I want to thank you for being the harbinger in taking the steps to address this issue.

As you are aware, Community Providers have been chronically underfunded for over 20 years. This chronic underfunding has eroded Connecticut's safety net and is placing many citizens in jeopardy.

As our Agency partners with the state to continue to provide services to individuals with disabilities in our community we are continually underfunded and finagling ways to make ends meet. Because our agency started services way back in the 1950's, the Arc of Meriden Wallingford is one of the lowest wage providers in the state, with Direct Support Staff starting at \$10.78 per hour. As with everyone else across the nation, our fixed expenses continue to grow each year. Since 2004 my agencies' Workers Comp has increased 133%, insurance 99%, medical 42% and utilities 43%. During this time we have only received 9.25% in increases, as you can see there is no way to balance a budget with out making cuts. We try to be creative and bring on new business to spread the costs, sometimes that works well and sometimes it just makes it worse.

I really do not want to be in the position of meeting with my employees to tell them there is no increase for them this year or in the years to come, knowing that they have already lost

money in their salary last year due to the increase in medical insurance costs and will probably lose more money this year.

Once that news is given I am sure I will hear from several staff that they are actively looking for another job. I will again hear the lines, I love working with the Arc, I love the individuals I serve, but I cannot afford my rent and I need more income. AND worse yet, I will hear from some of the individuals extremely upset by the loss of their care giver.

I feel it is time and it is critical for Connecticut to address this issue once and for all and let me and my staff stay in Meriden and concentrate on improving services to people with disabilities, instead of joining Pat Johnson up here each year with our tin cups.

Thank You