

Appropriations Committee
Hearing on the Governor's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan and the Impact of
the Governor's Rescissions
Wednesday, December 9, 2009, 2:00PM, Room 2C

Testimony by Janice Chamberlain, Associate Executive Director, Horizons
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Good Afternoon, my name is Janice Chamberlain. I am the Associate Executive Director at Horizons in South Windham, CT. Horizons is also a member of CT Nonprofits a trade association representing over 500 members across the state. For the past 30 years Horizons has been providing quality and cost effective programs and services for individuals with intellectual, physical, and behavioral challenges, autism, and other social and emotional needs at home, work, school and through a residential camp. We specialize in finding the unexpected in people and provide the supportive environment to help and encourage participants to strive for and achieve their potential.

I recognize that you have some very tough decisions to make about the state's current and future budget deficits and the Governor's Proposed Deficit Mitigation Plan however I am here today to urge you to stop the Governor's slow erosion of the nonprofit sector that will continue to occur with these additional rescissions. Nonprofits are the safety net of supports and services needed by our state's most vulnerable citizens (the elderly, children, poor families, disabled, mentally ill) and also for many of our neighbors, friends and family members, who have lost jobs, homes, and health benefits in this current economy.

We at Horizons have been steadily cutting costs and tightening our belts to address past and present budget cuts: We have frozen wages for the past two years, increased health insurance co-pays and the employee match, increased tuitions to offset reduced state reimbursements, cut Administrative staff, hired only part time staff to limit the number of people eligible for health benefits to reduce cost, cut overtime, cut consumer program time, implemented more energy efficiencies, increased fund raising and grant writing efforts and our line of credit to cover short falls in state funding.

The Governors' Deficit Mitigation plan reminds me of a game we played as children before there were laptops, iphones, Nintendo, and WII. Pick-Up-Sticks. Wikipedia defines Pick-Up-Sticks as " a game of physical and mental skill in which sticks have to be removed from a pile without disturbing the remaining ones. The first player chooses a stick and removes it by hand by lifting it, pressing down on the tapered end of a stick, or flicking it out with the helper stick. A turn ends if any other stick moves. The next player continues to extract sticks and so on." Ultimately somebody wins and somebody loses.

In the State's game of "Pick -up-Sticks" we all lose if we continue to erode the nonprofit sector with the Governors' plan. Nonprofits share a core mission with the State Legislature: To strengthen our communities and work together to create a healthy Connecticut for everyone. Help us help you keep this mission. Thank you.

"UCONN Football Players Won Over by Horizons' Damon Hall"

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Damon's story exemplifies how Horizons designs and implements person-centered services. We first met Damon when he attended some of our winter "Weekends in the Country" with his best friend Scott. Then Damon's school team contacted Horizons Educational Support Services to get help with Damon's transition from school to the world of work. Through Horizons' well developed relationships with the staff of UCONN Dining Services, Damon's transition plan panned out to include support and training in a job at the Tower Dining Hall in 2005.

Damon soon became a valued UCONN employee. His friendly, joyous manner and sincere desire to help others was noticed immediately and with assistance from Job Coaches from Horizons Supported Employment Services, Damon was able to obtain a position at the South Dining Hall at UCONN after graduating from high school.

Damon's boss at the South Dining Hall, Steve Sharkis was also one of Damon's biggest fans. When Steve assumed responsibility for managing the Putnam Dining Hall a few years ago, he took Damon with him, knowing that Damon's great work ethic and love of sports would make him a real asset in the Burton Family Football Complex.

You can see Damon at work cheerfully swiping the player's card as they enter the lunchroom. During lunch Damon mingles with the players and talks sports. He follows news of the team closely and is well versed in the details. Damon genuinely cares for all of the students and makes them feel really welcomed and special. This is important to Steve, and makes Damon a very valuable part of the Putnam Dining Hall team.

Damon's relationship with all of the athletes and in particular the UCONN football team is something extraordinary. Players seek him out, coming into the dish room to give him "high fives." They leave tickets at the booth for all of their home games and Damon attends them all. After each game, there are more passes, tackles, interceptions and touchdowns to talk about, more "high fives" to share and more of what makes life worth living.

To cap off this year's involvement with the football team Steve Sharkis and Emily Brodka, Damon's lead supervisor with Horizons coordinated with the UCONN coaching staff to secure two "field passes" for Damon for home game against Syracuse on Nov. 28th. Damon cheered on his beloved team, in VIP seating while mingling with press and coaching staff. What a way to end the season!

HORIZONS: Expect the Unexpected.