

**Testimony of Amy D'Agata, Dental Assistant
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Public Hearing, Thursday, March 5, 2009**

Good afternoon, honorable members of the committee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be heard.

My name is Amy D'Agata. I am a member of District 1199 and I work in the Dental Clinics at UConn Health Center, where I have worked for almost eight years.

UConn Health Center provides vital services for Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens, many of whom cannot speak for themselves. That is why I feel I owe it to them to be here today.

UConn Health Center is a one-of-a-kind facility that treats patients with multiple challenges, patients whom providers in the private sector and other hospitals do not have the resources or means to serve. The majorities of our patients are on state insurance or have no insurance at all and have trouble finding care. UConn Health Center is their last resort. Most of our patients have special needs, coming from nursing homes or the Veterans Hospital, or are hearing-impaired or needy children.

Some of our patients come on a stretcher or wheelchair from an hour away with two pages of illnesses and medications and cannot be moved for dental care. Others come with helmets on because they have behavior problems associated with their illnesses. At UConn Health center we treat them right in their wheelchair, not an easy feat. We have special needs patients on a waiting list for over a year because the only safe way their dental needs can be treated is in our operating room.

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I would like to share with you some of the experiences I have heard from caregivers as well as other agencies. I had a mother bring her son in who was in his twenties: he was autistic, had mental disabilities, and was deaf. His mother begged us to help him – her son was in pain and she couldn't get any help for him. This young man could not be moved from his wheelchair and had trouble holding still, I helped support his head and after a lot of nonverbal communication, we got the infected tooth out. I looked over and the Mother was crying. I told Mom he was okay and would feel better. Mom told me she was crying because after all her struggles to get her son help he would finally get a good nights' sleep, no longer in pain. Mom told me she wished she had found us years ago.

Another Mom told me her adult daughter who suffered a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair, couldn't get any dental care in the nursing home. The daughter had had beautiful teeth, not one cavity, and mom cried as we extracted rotted teeth that were not cared for while she was recovering. This Patient comes in regularly to us for care now.

UConn also has a Dental Emergency room. I have had patients come in with infections so bad that their airway was almost closed and had to go to the operating room immediately before it shut down altogether. Furthermore, our hospital is able to provide interpreters for the hearing impaired - can you imagine having a doctor come at you with a dental drill when you can't understand what they are doing? We have had an increase in hearing impaired patients because they take comfort in that service we provide.

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We also see Emergency Pediatric Patients suffering trauma such as falling off bicycles resulting in fractured jaws. We have a Pediatric Fellow, who sees patients once a week because other hospitals such as children's hospital are not taking new patients,

In short, At UConn Health Center we provide services for a vast array of patients who because of their circumstances cannot get appropriate care in the private sector. I feel Honored to work at UConn Health Center everyday our patients teach me the value of life, and they are grateful for the respect and value of care we provide for them. If you could only hear the stories I hear day in and day out, get the hugs from the special needs patient who was once afraid and is now your friend, the handshake from the tearful parents grateful they finally got care for their loved one, and the child who was crying and screaming when they first come in joyfully jump in the dental chair because they are no longer afraid, there would be no question in your mind that without the services of UConn Health Center, these patients will suffer and go without care.

There are a lot of people who need our care, who require some of the special services that we provide in a safe **public** hospital setting that set us apart from the rest: please do not let them down. Our mission to care for all is too critical to abandon.