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Testimony
In Support for HB 5199

Good morning Chairpersons Musto and Urban, Ranking members Boucher and Hovey, and members of the Select Committee on Children.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you in support of **HB 5199, An Act Concerning Criminal History Records Check of Youth Camp Employees and Volunteers.**

One of the principal objectives and responsibilities of government is to ensure the safety and well-being of our youth. Unfortunately I am learning that there is an area of our public safety laws regarding our children that needs to be addressed.

HB 5199 takes preventive steps by requiring all prospective employees and volunteers of youth camps to undergo a national criminal background check, ensuring that only competent and morally sound individuals are considered. Most camp employees and volunteers are decent, caring and law abiding individuals and most camps try their very best to reject unqualified applicants. Some camps, such as those that are part of the American Camp Association (ACA), conduct comprehensive background checks through outside vendors. In fact, mandatory background checks is one of more than 300 standards required for camps to be members of ACA. According to ACA New England's website, 45 camps in CT are accredited with them.

Unfortunately, many camps that are not part of a larger association might not be conducting background checks; it's these camps I worry about. The consequence of failing to screen employees and volunteers may potentially cause risk of injury to our children by those we trust most to care for them.

As part of the PROTECT Act of 2003, Congress offered limited volunteer organizations access to FBI records at reduced rates as part of a pilot program. Of the 29,000 background checks performed under this pilot program, 6.4 percent of the applicants had prior criminal records of concern. About 25 percent of volunteers with records had reports stemming from out-of-state offenses. Congress is currently considering passing a permanent pilot program open to all volunteer organizations.

We all are cognizant of the budget crisis faced by the State. Therefore we are proposing that the cost of background checks be equally split between the camp and applicant. While I understand that this bill will slightly increase the cost for camps, I believe it is important to do whatever we can to keep our children safe.

I know this committee is serious about protecting children, and I urge you to vote favorably on this proposal. At this time I'd be happy to address any questions the Committee may have for me. Thank you.