

**Testimony for Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Health and Hospitals
On the DMHAS Budget**

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DBA The Governor's Prevention Partnership
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Good afternoon, Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, Senator Harris, Representative Ryan and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Brian Pease and I am a consultant of The Governor's Prevention Partnership. Our non-profit organization is focused on providing resources to law enforcement, community coalitions and organizations, school leaders, state agencies, youth groups and others so that young people in our state will grow up free from substance abuse, underage drinking, violence, and bullying and be able to take their place in our future workforce.

I'm here today to ask for your continued support for prevention programs so that our young people can grow and thrive in nurturing families and communities. I commend DMHAS, the General Assembly and State of Connecticut on its leadership and belief in prevention and the dedication of my colleagues who work tirelessly on behalf of our young people.

Having lost both of my only brothers at the ages of 23 and 24 to substance abuse, I have made it a personal mission of mine to get out into Connecticut communities to try and educate our youth about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Before my brothers passed away, I never once thought that my family would be affected by substance abuse. It just never entered my mind as a possibility. I know there are many kids out there who share this same mindset, that they will never be affected by it. The fact of the matter is, substance abuse can affect anyone. It doesn't matter what type of family you were brought up in, what ethnicity you are, where you live, or if you have a genetic predisposition towards alcohol or drugs. It affects people from all walks of life. Everyone makes their own choices in life, but I know that my brother's deaths could have been prevented. I don't want to see other families have to go through what my family has gone through. I have to live the rest of my life wondering what could have been. The work that is done

by The Governor's Prevention Partnership is imperative to the success and health of families in Connecticut.

It's not difficult to see that drug and alcohol use among youths is on the rise. Kids are now starting to drink and use drugs as early as elementary school. It's easy to just blame the parents, but there is a lot more to the story than just parenting, though it plays a very important role. Youthful experimentation with alcohol is nothing new. What is new is the intensity of the experimentation, the age of onset and the emergence of medical information on the harm being done to the still developing adolescent brain. I'd like to focus your attention on that last area. We all know about the gray matter in the brain. Very few in the general public know about the "white matter" – a fatty substance known as myelin that gradually surrounds an adolescent's synapses making the circuitry more efficient, particularly in the areas of the brain dealing with memory, learning, impulse control and judgment (the executive functions). Essentially, the myelination process helps in the development of the power lines of the brain's gray matter, and that process can be impaired and compromised if alcohol is consumed too early (before age 23 on average). We need to better educate the public about this threat. Currently, 11 million young people in America are drinking alcohol and don't know this. Neither do their parents. I think it's time we throw the book at the underage drinking problem in Connecticut.

We know that kids will change their behavior if they perceive significant risk. Right now 70% of kids perceive a high level of risk in smoking tobacco, but only 40% perceive alcohol as a high risk activity. We need to change that. According to the 2004 NSDUH (National Survey on Drug Abuse and Health), 60% of young people nationwide aged 18-25 reported having alcohol in the last 30 days. In Connecticut, that number is 69%. 41% of young people nationwide aged 18-25 reported binge drinking in the last 30 days. In Connecticut, that number is 45%. The national average for the onset of alcohol use is 13 years old. In Connecticut, the average age is 11 years and 7 months. That information should tell you something. With 8,000 kids under the age of 16 initiating into alcohol every day, each week that goes by without a broad societal commitment to act means another 56,000 will be added weekly to the already unconscionable 11 million unknowingly doing damage to their brain development.

In the days ahead, I ask for your continued support. Underage drinking and drug use is not something that is just going to fade away. It is a significant problem in not only Connecticut but all around the country, and we need to continue to do everything we can to try and make a difference. There is much more work that needs to be done. Thank you. I appreciate your support.