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Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee.

Good evening. My name is Ashley Saunders and I am the Director of Behavioral Health Services for the School Based Health Centers and Child Guidance Clinics in Southeastern CT. I am here today to testify in opposition to HB 6350, An Act Concerning the Budget for the Biennium ending June 30, 2015. The Governor's budget proposes the total elimination of funding that was just approved by the legislature last session to establish new or expanded school based health centers, in addition to reductions in the school based health centers' line item for the next two fiscal years.

While I understand the difficult budgetary decisions that need to be made, this is not the service to cut as school based health centers currently serve 40,000 children and potentially could serve thousands more if the new and expanded services were kept in place.

In its wisdom, the governors and legislatures for the past 25 years have supported school based health centers. There are now 80 of these centers in 20 communities across the state. These centers are barrier-free, accessible safety nets for children for both their physical and behavioral health needs. Some also provide dental services, while others partner with community dental providers and encourage their utilization in the schools. Issues that often interfere with accessing medical and mental health services such as lack of transportation, parents' work schedules, lack of available providers, and denial of services due to lack of insurance or inability to pay are totally non-existent in the school based health center setting.

In these days when everyone is dealing with the horror of Sandy Hook and the potential for the same thing happening in ANY of our communities, this is a model that works and that is part of the solution. Children and adolescents who, as we say, "fly under the radar" are often identified by the nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and mental health professionals who staff these centers, to have serious behavioral health issues. Because there is a comfort level with accessing services in "their" school where they could be visiting for an ear infection, worry of an unintended pregnancy, or a mental health crisis, they feel comfortable walking into that school based health center for care and comfort. Often it is that "frequent flyer" coming to the nurse practitioner for non-specific complaints of fatigue or difficulty sleeping that leads to a formalized mental health screening. In our experience, 22% of the middle school students who completed a mental health screen had positive results. In a school based health center, the mental health clinician is in the same office and can continue the evaluation with availability of a timely psychiatric evaluation by one of our staff psychiatrists at the Child Guidance Clinic. These students are often the ones who are struggling with considerable issues but are not identified quickly enough so that services can be offered to them before their problems reach the crisis point.

I would like to close with a story of one student who came to the nurse practitioner last year for several of those "non-specific" complaints. During the third visit, the nurse practitioner

asked her to fill out the PSY screening tool. Her "score" was very high for suicidal ideation. An immediate evaluation by the mental health therapist was done, and regular treatment was begun. This year the student is in high school and wrote this letter to the therapist: "I wanted to write this to say thank you. I wouldn't be able to say this aloud without crying. I owe you everything. If I had never met you I would be dead right now. I'm so grateful. You helped me, gave me hope, encourage me, and saved me. You knew exactly what I needed. You helped me understand and understood me when no one else did. You gave me courage. You let me finally show my feelings. You didn't judge me. You let me cry, talk, and just ramble. But most of all you showed me I can trust people. You showed me what life has to offer. Thank you so much. You changed my life. I will never forget you."

So I ask you, members of the Appropriations Committee, are school-based health centers the place to make those difficult budgetary cuts? Should we wait until students like this have hurt themselves or others, sometimes fatally? Please preserve the school based health center line item and replace the money for new and expanded school based health centers.

Thank you.