

# **Center for Youth Leadership**

---

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

## **Connecticut Legislature Select Committee on Children *Testimony in Support of Raised HB 6400: An Act Concerning Mandated Reporters and Requiring Criminal History Records Checks for Youth Camp Directors and Alternate Directors***

*February 21, 2013*

*Millie Cunningham and Nicole Lue*

Hi Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Senator Duff and Representative Wood, both of whom represent our hometown of Norwalk.

My name is Millie Cunningham and this is Nicole Lue. We are here today on behalf of the 226 members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk to testify about *Raised HB 6400: An Act Concerning Mandated Reporters and Requiring Criminal History Records Checks for Youth Camp Directors and Alternate Directors*.

While we support making camp directors and their alternates mandated reporters of child abuse, per the committee's revision of Section 1, subsection b of section 171-101 of the general statutes, we believe there is a larger issue to address. Many people we talk to are surprised to learn that the Department of Public Health does not require national criminal background checks of employees and volunteers 18 years of age and older as part of its camp licensing process.

As you may know, the American Camp Association, one of the premier groups in the camp industry, requires criminal background checks for "...all staff and volunteers with access to children and youth." As of now, the only "check" conducted by the Department of Public Health during the licesning process is of the camp director and his/her alternate.

The department's "check" includes a review of Connecticut's sex offender registry and the Department of Public Health's files. In 2011, the latest year for which we were able to obtain statistics, checks were conducted on 472 camp directors and 998 alternates.

Furthermore, the Department of Public Health does not track the number of camp employees or volunteers who have contact with children and teens on a daily basis. Nor does the department require background checks on any of the thousands of camp employees or volunteers who have direct contact with campers.

Let's not be mistaken - there are camps in Connecticut that conduct background checks of all employees and volunteers regardless of state regulations, but it is not a universal occurrence. In fact, last year, our members called camps around the state posing as parents who are interested in enrolling their children. Of the 37 camps we randomly selected, 34 did not conduct background checks of employees or volunteers, or lead workshops on how to recognize and report child abuse.

The camps we surveyed cited two barriers - the cost of the background checks and the time it takes to get the results. Reasons, yes, but not legitimate ones when it comes to the physical and emotional safety of children.

For example, according to the American Camp Association, "...the costs of checks vary widely based on the type of checks that are conducted and in which state. Nationwide checks range from \$36 to \$70 per person." But the cost can be lowered if camps combine forces and contract with one or two companies to conduct scores of checks.

Also, we are mindful of the fact that many camps hire staff in the weeks leading up to the start of activities - for example, people they recruit from overseas and college students who have returned home from campus. But again we consider that a weak argument, especially when you consider that fingerprinting can be done if enough time is allotted for them.

Some have argued that parents should assume some of the burden for making sure that background checks are conducted by camps. That is far from an ideal expectation. When researching camps for their child, parents typically ask about the types of activities, the snacks that are served, and the cost of the camp.

The large majority of parents do not ask if employees and volunteers have passed a national criminal background check conducted by the camp. In fact, of the 109 parents of school aged children we surveyed two years ago, 106 said they never even thought of asking about background checks. And of the 106 parents, none had a camp representative volunteer information about background checks.

Finally, when we testified last year in support of a bill similar to HB 6400, we were asked for the number of alleged cases of child abuse in camps. As of this writing, the Department of Public Health does not collect such data - although it does have a complaint hotline - and the data collection system used by the Department of Children and Families does not track allegations of abuse that occur at camps.

We kindly ask that you review the attachment to our written testimony. It outlines the language we suggest you insert in HB 6400 about background checks for camp employees and volunteers.

We realize this would be a huge undertaking by the Department of Public Health and the camps it licenses; for example, the department issued 472 licenses in 2011 for camps that served 159,434 children and teens. But the number of campers alone - 160,000 - is reason enough to act.

We know this all sounds incredibly cynical, but it's a sign of the times. For example, all you have to do is review the December 2012 audit of the "inadequate background checks procedures" of new day care centers that are licensed by the Department of Public Health.

We all know that the vast majority of adults who work with children do so because they care about their well-being; they would never do anything to harm them. They do not hesitate to complete a background check and they are willing to wait to be hired until their prospective employer has received clearance of their background.

Camps also want to do right by children. But the camping industry in Connecticut needs some legislative oversight as far as the physical and emotional health of children are concerned. That's why we strongly recommend that Raised HB 6400 include language that would require camps seeking a license to operate in Connecticut to conduct national criminal background checks of all employees and volunteers 18 years of age and older.

Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you.

~ ~ ~

*Center for Youth Leadership  
Brien McMahon High School  
300 Highland Avenue  
Norwalk, Connecticut 06854  
203.852.9488 and [www.gocylnow.org](http://www.gocylnow.org)*

**Center for Youth Leadership**