

Testimony to the Public Health Committee by Yvette Bello, Executive Director of Latino Community Services, Inc. for Proposed S.B. No. 366 AN ACT REQUIRING LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS AND COUNSELORS TO COMPLETE CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSEWORK IN CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS on February 20, 2013.

Good Afternoon,

My name is Yvette Bello and I am the Executive Director of Latino Community Services, Inc.. I come here today to testify in full support for S.B. No. 366.

Latino Community Services or LCS is a nonprofit organization located in Hartford, CT. Our mission is two part, first to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS among Latinos and other populations at risk and second to help those already living with HIV/AIDS achieve better health outcomes. From the very beginning our organization was designed to offer all its services in a culturally competent manner to Latinos. The staff at Latino Community Service are almost entirely bilingual (Spanish and English) and in some cases bi-cultural. We have built a solid foundation as an organization that delivers quality HIV prevention and care programing with cultural respect as a basis.

While I know that we have built this competency in our field by no stretch of the imagination do I believe that we are the answer to all the health care needs for the entire Latino community nor do I believe that we have enough health professionals from historically underrepresented populations to meet the needs of Connecticut's changing demographics. What will keep Connecticut healthy will be that all health professionals including the groups represented in S.B. 366 have a basis of understanding in cultural competence. Access to culturally competent services can impact our overall health of our underserved populations and create a safer CT.

To illustrate the importance we at Latino Community Services place on providing culturally competent and culturally relevant services to our target populations I share this example. LCS was recently awarded federal funding to first increase access to mental health and HIV prevention among Latino and Caribbean and African American men who have sex with men between the ages of 18 and 29. We knew from the very beginning that while we have experience working with the Latino population, we felt it important to learn more about the urban LGBT culture as well as the values, attitudes and beliefs of Caribbean and African American men. Additional since LCS does not provide mental health services, we knew that the mental health provider we would partner with needed to value the importance of learning along with us. We felt it imperative that the partner would need to add value to the project and be able to deliver culturally competent mental health services to our population. We found that partner and solidified the partnership on the basis that we shared the goal of engaging this population in a consistent and competent manner. We went so far as making sure our mental health provider partner participated and attended our own 2 week long series of trainings to orient ourselves as a team to understand the complexities that exist for this community.

S.B. 366 not only makes sense but it allows for our trusted mental health providers an opportunity to learn a new tool to assist in making connections with people that truly are looking for help.

This idea is not new, in 2005 the CT Health Foundation released constructive recommendations in their report PATHWAYS TO EQUAL HEALTH: Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities in Connecticut. These recommendations were made by the Connecticut Health Foundation's Policy Panel on Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities which included then Mayor of Stamford, Dannel P. Malloy.

Among the recommendations, the panel included that "The Connecticut Department of Public Health should (a) collect and track data on the race and ethnicity of all licensed medical professionals and issue an annual report on the diversity of the health care workforce in the state and (b) require all healthcare professionals to participate in cultural and linguistic competence continuing education programs through licensure requirements."

Ladies and gentlemen, today I am here to support S.B. 366 because the bill is a good first step towards exposing the ranks of mental health professionals to a new tool that will ultimately make them better at what they do and more importantly more of an asset to their patients.