

Sen. Gerratana, Rep. Johnson, Members of the Committee:

I am JoAnn Eaccarino, President, Board of Directors of the CT Association of School Based Health Centers. I would like to speak in support of proposed Bill 374: An Act Requiring Behavioral Health Assessments for Children

As providers of comprehensive School Based Health Center services, we applaud this bill's proposal to screen children for behavioral health disorders. We believe that the earlier these problems are identified, the earlier they can be treated so that a child who would otherwise struggle to learn and fit into their social settings with family and friends can receive the necessary help to navigate childhood and adolescence successfully.

Our experience, however, would suggest some changes to enhance the spirit of this bill.

1. Behavioral health assessments can be done with much younger children. Our suggestion would be to start these assessments with their first entry into school. Educators have told us that they can identify a troubled child by 1<sup>st</sup> grade...so waiting until 6<sup>th</sup> grade may have missed some critical developmental milestones.
2. The health care provider performing a child's behavioral health assessment is a professional and must have the ability to share the results with whomever can assist with responding to the child's need. In some cases, especially when a situation of abuse exists, that professional's status as a mandated reporter must supersede the directives of this bill to only disclose results to a parent. The provider performing the assessment should have the authority to discuss the results with the school support team, or the child's primary healthcare provider. While most parents have the best interests of their child foremost in their heart and mind, experience tells us that there are many parents who dismiss concerns about their child's mental health and are resistant to receiving any kind of mental health services for a variety of reasons, most frequently because of the stigma that is still associated with it, or that is a sign of weakness in the family.
3. Not surprisingly, we strongly recommend the expansion of school based health centers where students are screened by the medical provider who can then seamlessly refer to the behavioral health provider if there are concerning results of that screening. The child can be seen, without stigma, without problems with transportation and cost, and in a setting that is familiar and barrier-free.
4. Finally, in addition to school based health centers, there need to be sufficient resources in place, specifically child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychiatric Advanced Practice Nurses who will be accessible to evaluate and treat these children, including those who don't have insurance or any means to pay out of pocket.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.