

## **Wolfgang SB374**

### **Testimony Against S.B. 374**

Good morning members of the committee, Chairwoman Gerratana and Chairwoman Johnson. My name is Peter Wolfgang and I am the President of the Family Institute of Connecticut Action, an organization whose mission is to “encourage and strengthen the family as the foundation of society and to promote sound, ethical and moral values in our culture and government.” I am here today to ask you to oppose S.B. 374, An Act Requiring Behavioral Health Assessments for Children.

I want to emphasize, first, that parents who voice concerns about this bill are not adversaries. We want to work with legislators to help ensure that children who experience mental health or behavioral problems get much-needed care. But, we also want it to be recognized that we are the foremost advocates of our children's wellbeing and we do not want that primary role to be assumed by the state.

SB 374 is vague and leaves numerous issues unresolved:

- It uses the generic title “health care provider” without specifying what qualifications must be possessed. Will these providers be required to have a degree, or field experience, or an active practice?
- It does not say what kinds of assessments will be used. Even well-designed tests can still result in false positives, which can potentially “brand” children with a lasting stigma. A certain test may be appropriate for one child but not another.
- It does not explain what will be done with the information. If a child is identified as at-risk, what action will be taken? Will those “health care providers” be under practical pressure to divulge confidential information to school or state authorities?
- If any children or parents will not submit to assessment, will their rights be protected? Could it prejudice attitudes toward them or earn them a label of “difficult” or “defiant”?
- It does not address liability should the assessment fail to identify a problem and another tragedy occur.
- Nor does it say to what extent parents are expected to bear the cost of these mandated assessments.

SB 374 is intrusive, requiring assessment of all children whether or not there is reason to suspect a problem. It is unnecessary, because it duplicates federal laws, namely the “Child Find” provision of IDEA, which requires boards of education to identify, assess, and serve children with “serious emotional disturbances,” and several Connecticut statutes already granting doctors and emergency personnel the discretion to act in situations where a person is dangerous to himself or others, or ones that are clearly designed to foster cooperation between state agencies.

We believe that an examination of our current laws and practices will reveal opportunities for improvement. No one wants a child with a serious problem to go undiagnosed or untreated. But it is those children's parents and physicians that know them best, that refer them to those who can help. The problem is not that troubled children go undiagnosed but in the delivery of services. What parents really need is better access to services and the consolidation of agencies so that parents with troubled children are not sent from one agency to another.

Families can find the system frustrating; one phrase we have heard is "getting bounced from agency to agency." It would be a tremendous help if there were a kind of "one-stop shop" for resources.

Again, parents want to be part of the solution. SB 374, which grants broad authority with few specifics, is troubling. We can address some of the real gaps and weaknesses of the system without taking parents out of the driver's seat. Our kids are the world to us and, more than anyone, we want to see them flourish.

Please respect the right of public school and homeschooling parents to not have their children undergo possibly unnecessary psychological evaluations against their will. Please vote no on S.B. 374 and focus instead on helping us have access to services that will help troubled children.