

**TESTIMONY OF KAREN SENICH  
BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
HB 6824, AN CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET  
FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2017**

**March 3, 2015**

Good Afternoon. My name is Karen Senich. I am the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury. We are a part of the Connecticut Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs. The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury (“Club”) has been providing safe, after school programs for Greater Waterbury’s children and teens for over 127 years. The Connecticut Clubs, combined, serve over 100,000 young people in 35 municipalities; Waterbury is a part of that strong network serving an average of 150 youth per day. On behalf of the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Waterbury, our members and their families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opposition to HB 6824 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium ending June Thirtieth 2017.

I am compelled to testify in an effort to ward off proposed cuts to the Neighborhood Youth Center grants, administered by the Department of Education. While these funds represent almost 5½ % of Waterbury’s annual budget, these funds represent the State’s greater support of the Boys & Girls Clubs throughout Connecticut. Begun in fiscal year 1994-95, the Neighborhood Youth Center Program was designed to provide positive experiences for at-risk youth. As intended, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Connecticut, including Waterbury, provide athletic and recreational activities; academic and enrichment programs, including tutoring and mentoring; and other preventative and intervention services for youth and their families. The Clubs provide positive reinforcement and guidance through outcome focused programing stemming the problems facing today’s youth. We are dedicated to enabling all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring and responsible citizens.

The Boys & Girls Club believes that there are five key elements to positive youth development: a safe, positive environment; fun; supportive relationships; opportunities and expectations; and recognition. Our programs are designed to incorporate those elements into everything we do – the outcomes being that Club members have higher academic achievement; are more likely to abstain from high-risk behaviors; are more likely to serve their community; and are more likely to engage in regular physical activity. (National Youth Outcomes Initiative, 2014 Outcomes Report, BGCA)

The revenue loss to the Boys & Girls Club proposed by HB 6824 cannot be made up by our membership. Our annual membership is seventy-five (\$75.00) dollars; members may come as many days per week and participate in whatever programs they choose. Ninety-five (95%) percent of our families live below the poverty line. Our Club members are considered “at risk”. Like many other urban areas, Waterbury is riddled with the symptoms of poverty. The members of our Club are at risk of dropping out of school, engaging in drugs, alcohol, tobacco, early sexual activity and violence. 79% of Waterbury students receive free or reduced costs for meals;

the state average is 33%. While we realize the significance of the budget deficit, we would respectfully suggest that such cuts would jeopardize the safety and welfare of the youth we serve.

In a survey conducted in 2014, the following was reported by Waterbury's members:

- Over 76% reported feeling safe at the Club
- Over 77% reported having gained new skills and knowledge at the Club
- Over 80% reported that they use what they learn at the Club outside of the Club
- Over 82% reported that they were more confident and felt better about themselves since they started coming to the Club

What does this data tell you? Feelings of safety and trust and being actively engaged in decision-making are critical to productive learning in young people. These measures indicate a positive direction for our youth's socio-emotional learning. Ultimately, the positive results created by the environment and programming at the Club lead to more positive outcomes for our youth.

The budget proposal is short sided and will put many of our youth back on the street after school; it will impede further progress of these young people. We must continue to provide our extraordinary programming to at risk youth and to provide the safe, fun and nurturing environment that is synonymous with the Boys & Girls Clubs. I strongly urge you to reject that portion of HB 6824 that eliminates the Neighborhood Youth Center funding.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.