

H.B. No. 6824 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2017 AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFORE AND OTHER PROVISIONS RELATED TO REVENUE

Appropriations Committee
Department of Mental Health and Addictions Services

To the Honorable Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Genga, Representative Porter and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

As an active member of the Durham Middlefield Local Wellness Coalition, I am writing in strong opposition to the proposed cuts to the Regional Action Councils. The Regional Action Councils provide communities with education, training and advocacy for substance abuse prevention and mental health promotion. Prevention is the job of the whole community, and RACs pull together school administrators, law enforcement, youth agencies, religious leaders, business owners, parent and youth to identify needs and implement solutions.

The Regional Action Councils were established by the CT Legislature in 1989 as part of the state substance abuse prevention infrastructure managed by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Through this system, RACs provide training and technical assistance to state funded Local Prevention Councils, volunteer driven coalitions that serve at the request of each community's chief elected official, and to a variety of community organizations.

Regional Action Councils and Local Prevention Councils recognize that substance abuse is a complex problem requiring multiple, reinforcing, proven prevention strategies and an engaged community to implement them. Our local communities will lose the following services if the proposed 79% funding cut to the Regional Action Councils remains:

- Use data, including student surveys, to identify the most critical places to focus limited prevention dollars. Data also documents positive change in communities and helps more effectively tell their stories. Communities use the data and success stories to obtain additional funds, engage other volunteers and strengthen community support.
- Conduct trainings, community forums and networking opportunities and provide technical assistance. RACs share updated, research based information with Local Prevention Councils, schools, law enforcement and other community based organizations.
- Create public awareness campaigns dispelling myths and misinformation directing the public to resources.
- Strategize with law enforcement, school administrators and local officials about policy change.

- Leverage additional grant dollars from state, federal and private funders to expand prevention and mental health promotion activities.
- Encourage collaboration at the regional and state level to maximize limited funds and reduce costs.

As a social worker at Coginchaug High School and Strong Middle School in Regional School District 13, I've seen first hand how beneficial the prevention programs conducted by our Local Wellness Council are to our students. The funding for the two EDGE groups have allowed for a variety of awareness programs and events that have informed our kids about making positive choices for a healthy lifestyle. The students love learning from other students about things that are relevant to them. The programs have given them actual strategies to use when faced with peer pressure and difficult decisions.

Over the last 20 years, the prevention community has seen reductions in tobacco use and underage alcohol use by implementing proven prevention strategies that target youth, families and their communities. One might conclude that prevention work is nearly done, however the increasing use of e-cigarettes, the growing potency of marijuana and the confusion about decriminalization of marijuana show challenges remain.

The entire statewide Regional Action Council system costs \$1.1 million dollars to staff 13 regional offices often with one or two staff. These funds allow the RACs to perform basic services and raise private dollars for additional programming. For every \$1 spent on prevention, \$10 is saved in future costs. To cut the core funding 79%, as the governor's budget has proposed, will dramatically affect the RACs' stability and their capacity to raise additional money for community prevention work. Please restore the \$1.1 million dollar core funding to the statewide Regional Action Council system.

Thank you.

Kathy Bottini, MSW
School Social Worker

Regional School District #13