



BLAST LYME DISEASE PREVENTION PROGRAM RIDGEFIELD HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Distinguished Chairs and Committee Members,

My name is Jennifer Reid and I am the Ridgefield Health Department's community coordinator for the BLAST Lyme Disease Prevention Program. I am here today in support of Raised Bill No. 207, AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING FOR A LYME DISEASE PREVENTION AND EDUCATION PROGRAM. I believe the Connecticut Department of Public Health (CT DPH) should be awarded \$450,000 to implement and sustain a statewide Lyme disease prevention effort based on the BLAST Lyme Disease Prevention Program.

It is an honor to endorse a bill that has the support of our health departments, elected officials, community members, and Lyme disease patients and their advocacy groups. This level of collaboration, putting the health of Connecticut's children first, marks a significant milestone in the history of this disease and should be recognized as such. All agree a commitment of state funds is needed to implement and sustain a statewide effort focused on raising awareness of tick-borne disease prevention and early symptoms.

The goal is to develop community-based prevention programs based on tick reduction strategies for residential properties and personal protection methods to prevent tick bites, and early diagnosis of tick-borne diseases. This program would have at least two general communication components including mass media messaging and the establishment of a network of community educators. A statewide program based on an existing program such as BLAST would provide advantages in cost effectiveness, efficiency and name recognition.

I have had the privilege of working with the BLAST Lyme Disease Prevention Program since its inception. BLAST is a community-based health promotion program created at the Ridgefield Health Department by a team of health educators and community members under the guidance of Science Advisor Dr. Neeta Connally. The evidence-based

BLAST recommendations are largely based on the results of a peridomestic Lyme disease prevention population-based case-control study conducted by Dr. Connally and colleagues at the Yale School of Public Health in collaboration with the CT DPH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19595558>)

BLAST is an acronym that stands for the five most important measures that people can take to prevent tick-borne diseases by reducing tick bites.

- B stands for bathing or showering soon after spending time outdoors,
- L reminds people to look their bodies over for ticks and to remove them properly,
- A encourages people to apply repellents appropriately to skin and clothing,
- S stands for spraying the perimeter of yards at the most effective time of the year,
- T reminds people to treat pets with veterinarian recommended products.

The CT DPH provided start-up funding for the BLAST program in 2008 through an RFP process. The Ridgefield Health Department was awarded \$50,000 to produce age-appropriate power points, print materials in English and Spanish, and a health fair display based on the BLAST recommendations. The BLAST Program was made available to all Fairfield County health departments during two training events in 2008 and 2009, and continues to be easily accessible as a resource on the Town of Ridgefield website.

The BLAST program has continued at the Ridgefield Health Department since 2008 with part-time help and volunteers filling requests from our local community as well as towns and cities across the state. To date, BLAST educators have personally participated in over 200 health fairs and community events in 35 Connecticut towns. BLAST is the official prevention program adopted by the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO) Tickborne Illness Task Force (now the Western CT Council of Governments) and has been recommended by CDC representatives as a model Lyme prevention program. BLAST was featured at the CDC/EPA Promoting Community IPM for Preventing Tickborne Diseases conference in Arlington, Virginia, in 2011. In 2013, a BLAST/Western Connecticut State University prevention research poster was selected for the 13th International Conference on Lyme Borreliosis and other Tick-Borne Diseases in Boston, Massachusetts.

It is important to note that this new endeavor is not intended to replace or compete with existing Lyme disease prevention programs; the goal is to offer assistance where needed. Health departments without the funding or manpower to create and run their own programs will have a designated regional BLAST educator to assist them. In 2004, a survey

of directors of health showed the major barriers to implementation and maintenance of a community tick-borne diseases prevention program were insufficient funds and staff to coordinate and administer the multifaceted program.

Excellent resources such as the *Tick Management Handbook* produced by the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station have been incorporated into the BLAST recommendations (<http://www.ct.gov/caes/site/default.asp>). We work together with our state experts to deliver comprehensive community and corporate educational events. Collaborations such as the one BLAST representatives initiated with the wellness team at Boehringer Ingelheim, one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies, have the potential to reach thousands of employees throughout our state and around the world.

The BLAST program supports the essential research being conducted to control this epidemic, possibly through an environmental intervention or a new vaccine. Unfortunately, a Lyme disease vaccine would not solve the prevention problem as we now know the same tick species that transmits the agent that causes Lyme disease also transmits multiple pathogens to people, including anaplasmosis, ehrlichiosis and babesiosis. While a variety of promising tick-control studies are underway, eradication of illness is not imminent and case numbers are growing.

We must also recognize the need to incorporate tick-borne disease prevention messaging in to programs encouraging children to spend more time in nature. I believe teaching children how to dress appropriately, do tick checks and identify tick habitat will not diminish their love of the outdoors. It empowers them to protect their own health, just as using sun screen helps them avoid skin cancer and wearing bike helmets protects against head injury. We clearly know the potential for illness exists when we explore nature in endemic states unprotected. Regional DPH BLAST educators will serve as much needed support for the many CT camps, scouting programs and nature preserves already attempting to do so responsibly each year.

Surveillance has shown Connecticut to have one of the highest rates of Lyme disease in the country. Since 1998, the CT DPH has reported about 3,000 cases on average to the CDC annually. The CDC has estimated there are approximately 10 times more people diagnosed with Lyme disease than reported annually. Using this estimate increases the number of people diagnosed with Lyme disease in Connecticut in 2013 to approximately 30,000. That is a staggering figure when you consider that these are new Lyme disease

infections. That number does not include the other infections and viruses which could be acquired from the same tick, referred to as co-infections, which can be even more life threatening. In comparison, CT reported four cases of West Nile Virus in 2013.

(<http://www.ct.gov/dph/site/default.asp>) Research has shown, if employed sufficiently, personal protection measures, and environmental tick-control measures around the home can reduce the number of Lyme disease cases.

Lyme disease is generally a mild illness in the early stages of disease and treatment of patients is usually effective. The disease may, however, cause serious or chronic illness involving multiple body systems, and this underscores the importance of using prevention measures. A recent study of 3,000 chronic Lyme Disease patients by LymeDisease.org and Prof. Jennifer Mankoff at Carnegie Mellon University (<https://peerj.com/articles/322.pdf>) provides statistics regarding quality of life and disability. The study found that chronic Lyme disease is associated with a worse quality of life than most other chronic illnesses, including congestive heart failure, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and arthritis. Fair or poor health was reported by 73% of patients with chronic Lyme disease.

In comparison, only 16% of those in the general population report fair or poor health. The survey also shows that patients with chronic Lyme disease have high disability and unemployment rates. Over forty percent of patients with chronic Lyme disease reported that they currently are unable to work because of Lyme disease and 24% of patients report that they have received disability at some point in their illness. This compares with 6% of the US population who are unable to work due to illness.

And most importantly, people at the highest risk for tick-transmitted diseases, including Lyme disease, are children. We are meeting with your committee today specifically because so many of Lyme's victims are Connecticut's children. The CDC says that Lyme disease is most common among boys aged 5-19. This age group is affected at three times the average rate of all other age groups and approximately 25% of all reported cases are children. I talk to parents daily who tell me their children are out of school, isolated and struggling. They say they wish someone had told them in no uncertain terms how serious Lyme and the other tick-borne diseases can be. They say that if they had known more, they would have done more.

This request for funding comes at a time when citizens are increasingly concerned that forty years after the illness was first recognized in our state, Connecticut continues to

have one of the highest rates of Lyme disease in the country. The CT DPH has committed to decreasing the incidence of Lyme disease as one of its *Healthy Connecticut 20/20* objectives. The strategy calls for "enhancing public education programs regarding prevention strategies, including tick avoidance." The BLAST program provides the message but our DPH needs the additional manpower and materials to deliver this information directly in to our communities.

BLAST has succeeded over the past six years largely because of the commitment of dedicated patients and family members who have been "touched by Lyme." It is time to lift this program off the shoulders of volunteers and bring it under the auspices of the CT DPH. Please support this request for funds to implement and sustain a statewide Lyme disease prevention program in 2015. Connecticut's children will thank you.

Sincerely,

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