H.B. No. 6824: An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2017,
And Making Appropriations Therefor And Other Provisions Related To Revenue.

Submitted By: Kaitlyn Fenner, Community Experience Manager III, The Kennedy Center, Inc.

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Senator Bye, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Kaitlyn Fenner, Community Experience Manager III from The Kennedy Center, Inc., an agency who currently supports 2.400 individuals with special needs. We are among the 500+ member agencies of the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits (CT Nonprofits.)

I would like to share my concerns with H.B. 6824, An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2017, And Making Appropriations Therefor And Other Provisions Related To Revenue. In particular, I wanted to express my sincere concerns to the funding reductions in the $10 million dollar cut being proposed to our day support services and $4 million dollar cut being proposed to our residential services. This funding reduction would threaten critical services to individuals and families in our service area.

As someone who has worked with individuals with Autism and Developmental Disabilities throughout the lifespan, I cannot possibly put into words what this potential cut would do to the amazing families and individuals that I work with. I ask you to please not think of this money as dollars and cents but instead as services.

Four years ago I helped bring individuals with disabilities back to the state of Connecticut to be closer with their families and caretakers because our state could not support them. Individuals who were deemed too clinically complex and behaviorally intense to be in our state but who, with support here in their home state, now go to school, control their anger and some who have even reunited with their families and live back home again. One boy I worked with told me "I want people to know that autism could happen to any kid and everyone should be respected the same…Kids with autism need extra help because they have conditions that are unknown to people. Sometimes people need to try to help them and they can help them to be better. That is what people have done for me. If people help kids with autism then the kids will be able to take care of themselves in the real world and be responsible and caring people and maybe take care of kids of their own one day. I am happy that I have a family that cares about me. Also, my Clinician and Behaviorist and staff are like my family too. They help me a lot. I hope that this can happen to every kid who has autism so they'll be better in the real world like me." I now ask you to think of them packing their bags and leaving again. Leaving not only their families, but their dignity and confidence behind; not giving them the chance that this young man appreciated so much. If we, as a state, cannot look into the eyes of a person with a disability, a person who needs us, and not promise to help them then who can?

Think of standing in front of 20 individuals with Autism and telling them that the program that they have come to love is being closed. That they can no longer make friends, practice skills and

feel accepted. Think of taking away someone's iPad-their voice. Telling this person that the state can no longer afford to give them a chance to ask for the restroom or a snack when they want it; instead telling them that they must resort to grunting and pointing for objects again. Plan to sit across from a mother who cries over her son's inability to say I love you; something that she has longed to hear for thirty years and tell her that she must resort back to bathing him, dressing him, feeding him and taking the brunt of his aggressive behaviors because the state can no longer fund his day program-a necessary break for mom and the rest of the family.

Stop thinking of these cuts as simply numbers on a piece of paper but instead of people and their opportunities. People who I am fortunate enough see explore their world with a new set of eyes each day. People who, with the support of their day services, earn a paycheck and light up when it's pay day. People who have learned to take the bus to the store all on their own thanks to our travel training program or have learned to count change at the cash register at the age of 42. People who practice writing their name every single day because, for the first time, people know that they can do it and have not discarded them as 'retarded.' People who are finally fitted with a walker that actually glides when they walk, a winter coat that keeps them warm and welcomed into an art room where their emotions can be put on paper when their brain struggles to get them out. These are not dollars and cents. These are not numbers on a paper. These are smiles and laughter and hugs and pats on the back. They are families who have fought their entire lives for their kids, caretakers who have given everything and supporters who know that there is so much more to someone than just a diagnosis.

With these cuts, all of these things have the possibility to go away. You don't see smiles on the faces of families who are told there is no money to help transition their child into a new program he is anxious about, no hugs when you tell someone that they have no money for respite support. No one wants to pat you on the back when you report that programs have to close and no one can come together when jobs must be cut. I urge you, before making these cuts, to think of these people and services. Think of the mom who told me that she and her husband went on their first vacation in 40 years because they finally had a program that they could trust with their son and think of the brother who is battling ALS but gave up his entire life to take care of his disabled brother. Think of the family who just agonized over putting their sister in a program for people with dementia and think of the dad who is petrified of who will love his son when he is gone. Think of these people and these situations-not dollars and cents and numbers on a budget and piece of paper.

The proposed cuts, coupled with four rounds of rescissions/budget modification dating back to late 2012, have put enormous pressure onto an already severely depleted system. The reality is that nonprofit providers have been pushed to our breaking point due to the lack of investment over the past two decades. Chronic underfunding has already forced many nonprofits to close, compete against one another for scarce resources, layoff employees, reduce benefit packages; altogether creating a win or lose system that weakens the entire nonprofit sector and threatens its sustainability.

As members of the Appropriations Committee work toward creating your 'Recommended Budget' for SFY16 and 17, I urge you to restore these harmful cuts to ensure critical programs and services are available to the residents of Connecticut. I'd also like to respectfully remind you

that investing in the nonprofit sector will improve service delivery, increase economic activity, and save taxpayer money; a “win-win” for policymakers working to strengthen the economy, the nonprofit workforce trying to make ends meet, and most importantly, the clients and their families who count-on efficient, cost-effective, and high-quality services in our communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, or for additional information.

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