

**Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Departments of Public Health,
Developmental Services, and Mental Health and Addiction Services
H.B. 6824: An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2015**

Sharon D. Langer, M.Ed., J.D.
Appropriations Committee
March 6, 2015

Dear Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am the Advocacy Director at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families. I am also an appointed member and a chair of the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council that oversees the behavioral health and substance abuse services of the HUSKY program and children in the care of the Department of Children and Families.

I am testifying on behalf of Voices for Children in **opposition** to the Governor's proposed cuts to programs and services that benefit children and families funded through the Departments of Public Health, Developmental Services, and Mental Health and Addiction Services. These proposed reductions when taken together are at odds with the newly released recommendations of the **Sandy Hook Commission** and will undermine the gains our state has made in improving access to behavioral health services and the other critical supports we provide to vulnerable children, youth and their families.

Specifically, we oppose:

- *Reductions in funding for School Based Health Centers* (DPH budget)

School based Health Centers already received a cut of over \$500,000 as a result of recent rescissions by the Governor. The FY 15 budget proposes an additional \$1.3 million reduction for a total of \$1.8 million. This is at the same time that children's visits for mental health services at SBHCs have risen eleven percent during the last four years.¹ We have no doubt that these reductions will lead to reduced staffing and services.

Early intervention is an important investment for the state to make. It creates better outcomes for children and provides significant cost savings in the long run due to improved health and decreased usage of high cost emergency interventions, such as hospitalization and residential treatment. School based health centers are at the forefront of providing such early intervention.

We also know that schools are a critical part of the mental health care delivery system, providing approximately 70-80% of mental health services received by children in Connecticut. School-based health centers provide individual, group and family counseling for mental health issues in more than

¹ Communication with Jesse White Fresse, Executive Director, Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers (March 6, 2015)

40,000 visits on a yearly basis.² Offering services in schools can both reduce stigma and facilitate access, getting more services to hard-to-reach populations.

- *Reductions in Voluntary Services (DDS)*

The Governor proposes more than a **sixty percent cut** from current services to the DSS voluntary services program, from just over \$33 million to just under \$13 million. This program provides services to families with children and adolescents who have intellectual disabilities as well as behavioral health and communication challenges, and their families. Many of these children have the severest form of autism. I know first-hand the importance of such services, having worked with such youth and their families as a home-school liaison. These are services and supports that help families keep their children at home, and prevent costly hospitalizations and residential treatment services, often born by the state. It is penny-wise and pound foolish to cut this funding.

- *Reductions in Young Adult Voluntary Services and Grant Funds (DMHAS)*

We are opposed to the cuts in the DMHAS budget since they will inevitably lead to reduced access to care for young adults and families in need of mental health and substance abuse services. My co-chairs and I of the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council recently sent a letter to Secretary Barnes expressing concerns about the cuts to DMHAS grants that fund behavioral health clinics.³ The expectation by the administration that Medicaid funding would make-up for the cuts to state grant funding has not born out. Further cuts will only make matters worse.

In sum, we are concerned that the proposed cuts to these agency budgets will undermine the goals and recommendations of the Sandy Hook Commission. The Commission's findings and recommendations make clear that we need to improve coordination among systems of care, to improve access to mental health services within schools (including school-based health centers) by providing additional social workers, psychologist and nurses, and to help whole families improve their resiliency in the face of trauma and stress. These cuts will set us back.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony in opposition to the Governor's proposed budget.

Please feel free to contact me if you need additional information or have questions. I can be reached at slanger@ctvoices.org and by telephone at 203.498.4240.

² "Protecting the Health of Connecticut's Young People," *Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers*, (October 2010), available at: <http://www.ctschoolhealth.org/Announcements/view.asp?id=54>

³ Correspondence to Secretary Benjamin Barnes from the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council, (January 20, 2015), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/ph/BHPOC/>.