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March 1, 2015

Governor's Bill Number 6847: AN ACT ENHANCING ACCESS TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SERVICES FOR YOUTHS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER.

Dear Senator Crisco, Representative Megna, and Members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee:

I am a licensed clinical psychologist with a private practice in Ridgefield, and I am writing to offer Connecticut Psychological Association's (CPA) **strong support** of **Governor's Bill Number 6847**. This bill enhances access to behavioral health services for youths with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by requiring group health insurance policies to provide coverage for the diagnosis and treatment of ASD, including behavioral therapy, prescription drugs for the treatment of symptoms and comorbidities of an ASD, direct psychiatric or consultative services provided by a licensed psychiatrist, direct psychological or consultative services provided by a licensed psychologist, physical therapy provided by a licensed physical therapist, speech and language pathology services provided by a licensed speech and language pathologist, and occupational therapy provided by a licensed occupational therapist.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 in 68 children in the United States are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. The incidence of children being identified with an autism spectrum disorder is increasing. This most recent estimate is about 30% greater than the previous estimate in 2012.

Autism affects how one experiences the world. Children with ASD can have social, communication, and behavioral difficulties. They have difficulty developing and maintaining social relationships, which are vital to optimal child development. Additionally, a diagnosis of autism is often associated with intellectual disability, difficulties with motor coordination, attention dysregulation, trouble sleeping, and physical health issues, such as gastrointestinal disturbances.

Research has shown that the economic burden associated with having a child with an autism spectrum disorder is substantial. Specifically, children with ASD have higher numbers of health care office visits and prescribed medication compared to children without ASD. Furthermore, children with ASD are more likely to utilize special education services. Overall, ASD is associated with higher healthcare costs and higher education costs.

Well-replicated, empirically sound research has repeatedly shown that early intensive behavioral intervention (also referred to as behavior therapy) improves outcomes for children with ASD. Specifically, early intensive behavioral intervention improves learning, communication, and social skills in children with ASD. Additionally, behavioral intervention decreases problematic behaviors that may impede one's learning and social/emotional development. Most effective treatment programs typically also include speech and language therapy (to help children with ASD coordinate the mechanics of speech or utilize an alternate method of communicating, as well as understanding and utilizing the social aspect of language), occupational therapy (which helps children and young adults gain age-appropriate independence), and physical therapy (to address problems with gross motor movement). Children with ASD are also more likely to experience anxiety and depression as adolescents, which makes access to

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psychiatric and psychological care vital to one's well-being. Access to multiple modes of treatment, including intensive behavioral treatment, at an early age is essential to a positive outcome when a child is diagnosed with an ASD.

On behalf of CPA, and myself, **please support Governor's Bill Number 6847**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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