

Date: February 16, 2016

To: Appropriations Committee

From: David W. Blagys, Executive Director - Wakeman Boys & Girls Club

Re: H.B. No. 5044 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES  
FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2017

I am writing on behalf of Wakeman Boys & Girls Club to discuss the proposed elimination of the Neighborhood Youth Center Grant.

The elimination of this grant will result in the reduction of services to our most vulnerable children and teens in Fairfield and Bridgeport. We are hopeful that you will see the great benefit in restoring these funds, as Wakeman Boys & Girls Club plays a critical role in serving our community's youth, and relies heavily on this grant.

For more than 100 years Wakeman Boys & Girls Club has been providing the youth in our community with quality programs, but one could argue that the work we are doing now is more important than ever. Please consider what Wakeman Boys & Girls Club provides to nearly 4,000 children and teens in our local community:

At our Smilow-Burroughs Clubhouse in Bridgeport:

- More than 600 children take part in our After School Program and Summer Camp program annually. Academic success and healthy lifestyles are the focus of both of these structured programs and as a result members have improved their grades and increased their physical fitness and we have been successful at reducing the "summer slide".
- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) programming provides members with important learning opportunities through Khan Academy, computer coding classes, and Lego Robotics
- The diplomas2Degrees college-readiness program has guided dozens of teens through high school and helped them apply for college, navigate the financial aid process, find scholarships, and most importantly, attend college. Nearly all of the teens in this program are the first in their families to attend college.

At our Southport Clubhouse:

- More than 200 children come to the Clubhouse each day for homework help, fitness activities, and enrichment programs
- 150 middle and high school students take part in community service and leadership programs and provide thousands of hours of volunteer service in the greater community
- More than 1,000 children participate in sports leagues that teach good sportsmanship, teamwork, and the basics of the game.

At our McKinley School Outreach Extension:

- An award-winning mentoring program pairs 70 teen volunteers one-on-one with McKinley students to support their academic success, social skills, and fitness activities
- Additional tutoring programs provide one-on-one homework assistance to students

There are more than 100 programs offered at Wakeman's Clubhouses annually, all which provide critical services and support to youth in a safe, supervised place. Our Clubhouses are open after school, in the evenings, on weekends and on most state and federal holidays. Extended hours on these holidays and during our summer camp provide working parents the flexibility to bring their children to our Clubhouses and still make it to work on time.

Research shows that from 3pm-6pm juvenile crime increases dramatically. In Bridgeport, the need for safe, structure programming is especially critical. According to the FBI, Bridgeport is one of the most dangerous cities in America and the wide achievement gap in the state directly affects Bridgeport students. While the statistics are grim, the opportunity is great...but only if we have the necessary funding to keep our doors open, hire staff, and run high-impact programs that change our members' lives for the better. Each day we see our members learning, growing, and staying on track to graduate, and the state funding is essential to ensuring these critical programs continue for our youth.

Boys & Girls Clubs in Connecticut receive funding through the Neighborhood Youth Center Grant and use that funding to implement programs that improve academic success, develop healthy lifestyles, and build good character and citizenship in our members. These programs enable our Club to reinforce what is being taught in school, provide vital mentoring for youth, and give support to many children and teens who are desperately in need of a safe place to spend their time.

Boys & Girls Clubs in Connecticut are part of our state's history and landscape, dedicating much of our efforts to help close the achievement gap for so many young people who attend our clubs. Clubs have a very real impact on a young people's lives during the critical out of school time, on weekends and in the summer months. The state of Connecticut has been a great partner in the collective effort to bring opportunities to those children who are challenged by the achievement gap. The budget Governor Malloy has presented puts the brakes on these efforts by eliminating all funding from the Neighborhood Youth Center Grant.

On behalf of all of our members at Wakeman Boys & Girls Club and the youth who benefit from Boys & Girls Clubs programming across the state, please consider restoring the Neighborhood Youth Center funding so that all of our communities serving at-risk youth are able to continue to positively impact the futures of our next generation.