



Testimony in Opposition to HB 5044, *An Act Making Adjustment to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2017*

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Gerratana, and Representative Dillon. My name is Melanie Bonjour, and I am the President of the Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers and Director of five School-Based Health Centers sites located in the City of Danbury and Town of Newtown. I am here to testify this evening in opposition to HB 5044, most notably the proposed reductions to School Based Health Centers in the Department of Public Health portion of the budget.

Between January and July 2015, state funding for School Based Health Centers was reduced by \$891,218 due to rescissions and overall budget reductions. In December 2015, a second rescission removed an additional \$117,474 from the line item resulting in a total \$1.09 million reduction. The current allocation for SBHCs is \$11,630,024.

The Governor's budget adjustment proposes to reduce the current SBHC line item allocation of \$11,630,024 by an additional \$477,431 *during this current fiscal year*, annualize that reduction, and cut an additional 5.75% from SBHCs in FY17, for a total cut of \$1.24 million. These adjustments will set SBHC funding back to 2010 levels, all while demand for services has increase daily.

In the over thirty-four years I have worked in the field of public health, I honestly have not witnessed a better way of providing timely access to health care services than through School Based Health Centers (SBHCs). School based health centers provide core social services with proven results. Services are delivered where the children are - in school - and provide immediate access to care for many serious health issues that impact school performance and academic success. SBHCs are one of the *most cost-effective* ways to keep children healthy and attending school so they can continue to learn.

In the last 5 years, visits to Connecticut's SBHCs for mental health services have increased by 11%; from 30% of all visits to 41% of all visits. In review of this school years data from my Danbury and Newtown SBHC sites, there have already been over 1,084 visits for mental health services since the start of the school year in September – 1,084. It is a very realistic, yet alarming fact that student who receive these services, many of which have very serious disorders, report that they would not have the care they need if the SBHCs were not available and would likely be left suffering in silence. SBHCs cannot sustain these cuts and still meet the increasing demand for services that keep children healthy and in school.

The Newtown Middle School SBHC site was established in 2015 to respond the town's anticipated long-term need for mental health services as a result of the Sandy Hook tragedy.

Healthy Kids Make Better Learners

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Celebrating its one-year anniversary of operation on February 26th, the program has been well-accepted as an effective health care provider in the community, with over 343 students enrolled in the center, and having 342 visits, 203 for mental health concerns alone. While we prepare to celebrate its successful first year, we do so while having also experienced significant budget reductions in its short time in operation.

Over the past twenty-plus years, Connecticut's SBHCs have worked arduously to align with health care reforms to provide the highest quality care possible. We have made significant strides to offset dwindling state funds through billing State Medicaid and HUSKY insurance and in fact, were the first state in the country to pass legislation to allow SBHCs to bill commercial insurance. Staff working in the SBHC sites deliver high-quality services while keeping cost down, and they do so by accepting salaries and wages that are far below what is paid in other health care settings.

Site staff take their charge very seriously and strive every day to meet the complex health issues faced by students. The child poverty rate in Connecticut continues to climb, and school based health centers have been present every day to help students cope with a myriad of issues that impact their health and their academic performance.

The funding reductions to school based health centers have been significant over the last few years. Further reductions will lead to less staff hours, less days per week of service, and the realistic possibility of closing of some sites. SBHCs are currently working on bare bones funding and will find it impossible to continue to provide the critical services CT children require if the Governor's budget adjustment is adopted.

On behalf of CT SBHC, I respectfully ask you and the entire State Legislature take action to defend and maintain the SBHC DPH budget line item – for the very programs you worked so hard to find the funding for to have them established in the communities in which you live and serve.

Thank you for your time and attention.

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