



Date: February 18, 2016

To: Appropriations Committee

From: Susan Walkama, LCSW
President and CEO
Wheeler Clinic, Inc.

Re: HB-05044 Department of Mental Health and Addictions Proposed Budget

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Susan Walkama, and I am the President and CEO of Wheeler Clinic. I would like to thank you for providing this opportunity to speak today on behalf of my colleagues and the more than 19,000 individuals we serve each year.

Wheeler provides a comprehensive continuum of mental health and substance abuse recovery, primary care, community justice, education, child welfare, early childhood and prevention and wellness services across Connecticut. The individual and families who come to us for care include some of the most vulnerable populations in our state including individuals with serious and frequently co-occurring mental illness and addiction, co-morbid medical disorders and histories of exposure to trauma and violence. The services we provide are highly effective in helping these individuals and families function successfully in the community, diverting emergency room and inpatient hospitalizations, and reducing truancy and recidivism, but these services are also chronically underfunded and seriously threatened in the proposed budget.

We are extremely concerned that in total, the Governor has proposed cutting vital programs and services by over \$408 million (or 72% of the total cuts of \$569.5 million for SFY17) across the 14 state agencies that partner with nonprofit providers.

Note: The \$408 million number was calculated by adding up the total number of cuts to programs and services impacting nonprofit providers, from what has been actually appropriated in the biennial budget for SFY17 – current law. The numbers have been adjusted for fringe benefits and transfers.

As it stands, each state agency would cut funding by an additional 5.75%. There is no assurance that state agencies would be required to evenly distribute this cut across all programs. These cuts could disproportionately fall on, and in some cases completely eliminate, critical programs that serve some of the neediest residents of our state.

In the DMHAS budget, the Governor is also proposing a \$34,528,203 cut to the combined block grant “Agency Operations” account at DMHAS. There is no assurance that DMHAS would be required to evenly distribute this cut across all programs. This cut could disproportionately fall on, and in some cases completely eliminate,

outpatient mental health and substance abuse programs altogether. At a time when the most acute human and financial costs of untreated co-occurring mental health and addiction disorders are evident in our emergency departments, on our streets and in our living rooms, these cuts would further exacerbate the unaddressed addiction and mental health access problem in Connecticut and weaken an already fragile, underfunded service delivery system.

The proposed cuts will also negatively impact children. Many of the adult clients we work with are the parents or guardians of children involved in the child welfare system and are referred to Wheeler for domestic violence treatment, addiction and mental health care. Timely access to mental health and addiction treatment for adults is critical to reducing incidents of child maltreatment, keeping children safe and breaking the cycle of poverty, incarceration, illness and addiction.

Individuals and families in need of critical community-based services will not simply disappear if care is no longer available. Instead, they will have to seek exponentially more expensive services in emergency departments and hospitals, or worse, seek no help at all. They may end up in jails, become homeless, more deeply involved in the child welfare system, or become a danger to themselves or others. The long-term costs to the state and to individuals and families are untenable. These are the worst cuts to mental health services in Connecticut in a generation and are targeted towards the most vulnerable individuals and families in our state.

For the past two legislative sessions, the legislature has restored funding to maintain DMHAS mental health and substance abuse programs, proving that you take the needs, lives, and well-being of Connecticut residents seriously. Mental health and addiction services are an indispensable core component of any healthcare system. Please continue to support these vital services for all people in need within our state.