

**TESTIMONY OF WAKEMAN BOYS & GIRLS CLUB
BEFORE THE STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**HB 5306, AN ACT CONCERNING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OFFICE OF
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

February 24, 2016

My name is David Blagys and I am the Executive Director of the Wakeman Boys & Girls Club (WBGC), an organization that has faithfully provided safe, after-school programs for thousands of children and teens for over 103 years. On behalf of our Board of Trustees and our member families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opposition to HB 5306, an act concerning recommendations from the Office of Early Childhood Education.

I am compelled to testify because, if these recommendations are implemented, our Club will be faced with a dramatic reduction in children served, a significant increase in the membership fees, employee lay-offs, reduced hours of operation, and potential closing of sites.

Currently, Connecticut General Statutes sec. 19a-77 specifically exclude Boys & Girls Clubs from the definition of “child day care services.” WBGC, a member in good standing of Boys & Girls Clubs of America, had 3800 youngsters on our member roll between the ages of 6 – 18 in 2015. And while the WBGC is exempt from child day care licensing for its after-school program, it does conduct a state licensed summer day camp and, like all 17 Clubs in Connecticut, is subject to the vigorous membership requirements of Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Boys & Girls Clubs are youth development organization, not a day care or school readiness provider. The programs we conduct are driven towards our universal priority outcomes of healthy lifestyles, academic success and good character and citizenship. We believe that there are five key elements to positive youth development: a safe, positive environment; fun; supportive relationships; opportunities and expectations; and recognition. Our programs are designed to incorporate those elements into everything we do – the outcomes being that Club members have higher academic achievement; are more likely to abstain from high-risk behaviors; are more likely to serve their community; and are more likely to engage in regular physical activity. (National Youth Outcomes Initiative, 2014 Outcomes Report, BGCA)

WBGC average member daily attendance is 550. Additionally, in 2015, our programs served 1,968 youth who were not members; they either “dropped-in” or participated in a program(s) as representative(s) of other community organizations. Our members may come as many or as few days a week as they choose; parents are not required to tell us on what days their children will attend. This arrangement allows the families we serve the flexibility their circumstance require. We do not know, on any given day, how many children at any age will attend the after-school program. This means that we are prepared every day to engage more or less of our current average daily attendance.

Many of our members come from Asset Limited Income Restrained Employed households meaning they are above the federal poverty level, but still do not have enough income to afford the basic necessities of life, such as food, child care and housing. Most of our members are bused to the Club by their school bus – meaning proximity is also factor in coming to the Club.

Like many other urban areas, Bridgeport is riddled with the symptoms of poverty. The members of our Club are at risk of dropping out of school, engaging in drugs, alcohol, tobacco, early sexual activity and violence. Through outcome focused programs that include athletic and recreational activities; enrichment programs, including mentoring; and other preventative services, the Club provides positive reinforcement and guidance to stem the problems facing today's youth. We are dedicated to enabling all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring and responsible citizens.

The elimination of the child day care license exemption will force the WBGC to significantly increase the cost and type of membership to account for the substantial increase in the cost of operating due to the licensing requirements. We also would no longer be able to serve the high number of young people we currently do. Our members will not go elsewhere – they come to us because of cost, proximity and our safe and fun environment. Our families would require state assistance to pay for after-school programs (increasing the numbers receiving state assistance) and those who did not qualify would be no longer be able to participate in the Club activities. These children, especially our teen members, would be on the street or home alone after school – further impeding the progress of these underserved youth.

This proposal undermines the model of the Boys & Girls Clubs, a model which has successfully enhanced the lives of young people, in WBGC case, for over 100 years. This proposal will literally place the futures of thousands of kids in jeopardy.

For the sake of our communities and our members, we request that you allow us to continue our good work on behalf of our at risk youth and urge you to reject the proposal from the Office of Early Childhood Education that would eliminate the Boys & Girls Clubs' exemption from child day care licensing.

Your attention and consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

David W. Blagys
Executive Director