

TESTIMONY OF: Michael Suchopar
BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
HB 5306, AN ACT CONCERNING RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE OFFICE OF
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

February 24, 2016

My name is Michael Suchopar. I am the Executive Director of the Bristol Boys & Girls Club. The Bristol Boys & Girls Club has been providing safe, after school programs for 100 to 350 children and teens for over 100 years. The Club, chartered under the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, served over 8,000 young people between the ages of 6 – 18 in 2015. On behalf of the Bristol Boys & Girls Club, our members and their families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opposition to HB 5306, An Act Concerning Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood Education.

I am compelled to testify because, if these recommendations are implemented, the Bristol Boys & Girls Club will be faced with closing, limiting memberships and/or raising the cost of membership to a prohibitive amount. Connecticut General Statute's sec. 19a-77 specifically excludes Boys & Girls Clubs from the definition of "child day care services". While the Bristol Boys & Girls Club is exempt from child day care licensing for its after-school program, it is a licensed day camp and, like all 17 Clubs in Connecticut, is subject to the vigorous requirements of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

The Bristol Boys & Girls Club is a youth development organization, not a day care, baby-sitter or school or school readiness provider. The programs we run 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)

Currently, the Bristol Boys & Girls Club has 1,600 members. Our average daily attendance by members is approximately 450. In 2015, our programs served over 7,000 youth who were not members; they either "dropped-in" or participated in a program(s). 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 for 650 - 1000 young people.

Annual membership for after-school at the Bristol Boys & Girls Club is \$80 per year. Thirty five (%) percent of our members are from single family households and seventy (%) percent of our

members receive free or reduced cost lunch. 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, Bristol Boys & Girls Club 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 would destroy our model of serving our community. It would force the Boys & Girls Club of Bristol to have to choose between closing its doors after 100 years or significantly raising 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 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 helped boys and girls for, in Bristol Boys & Girls Club's case, over 100 years. This proposal puts futures in jeopardy.

For the sake of our communities and our members, we must be allowed to continue to provide our extraordinary programming to at risk youth and to provide the safe, fun and nurturing environment that is synonymous with the Boys & Girls Clubs. I strongly urge you to reject the proposal of the Office of Early Childhood Education that would eliminate the Boys & Girls Clubs' exemption from child day care licensing.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Michael Suchopar
Chief Professional Officer
Bristol Boys & Girls Club, Inc.