Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

March 1, 2019

HB 7148: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2021, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Christina Emery, Executive Director of Prime Time House

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Christina Emery, Executive Director of Prime Time House. I am here to comment on H.B. 7148 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2021, and Making Appropriations Therefor.

I respectfully ask that you protect and fully fund essential community services. Community nonprofits improve our quality of life, making Connecticut a better place to live and work.

Prime Time House, based in Torrington, offers pathways to independence and productivity to adults living with severe and persistent mental illness. We are a non-clinical program that has “members”, not clients or patients, many of which come to us after they have hit rock bottom.

The Clubhouse is the largest program. It is a social rehabilitation program that follows an evidenced-based model shown to aid in recovery. Members attend on a voluntary basis and actively participate in the work-ordered day. They work with staff to define their recovery goals with the hope of leading a productive and satisfying life in the community. The annual cost of our Clubhouse is $1,800 per person, much less than the cost of emergency psychiatric care or incarcerations.

The Career Services Supported Employment program utilizes an evidence-based practice known IPS, or Individualized Placement and Support. With the guidance of Employment Specialists, adults with mental illness are able to obtain and retain jobs. This job can be a lifeline, it gives someone struggling with mental health a purpose and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. It also puts people to work in the community; when comparing the employment rate among people living with mental illness, the rate for our program participants is 45%, as opposed to just 14% of the general population. (Source: Clubhouse International)

The Supported Housing Program assists ten formerly homeless individuals who have suffered from severe and prolonged mental illness and/or chronic chemical dependence find and retain safe, retain affordable housing. A housing case manager assists the tenants with transportation, budgeting, vocational assistance and other services through frequent home visits and outreach.
The goals of providing high-quality mental health services do not come without challenges. Year-after-year of state budget difficulties have put increasing pressure on our community nonprofit. We have already eliminated our Prime Rides program and had to sell our wheelchair accessible van. This program provided much need transportation throughout rural Litchfield County, a region with extremely limited public transportation. We have made significant cuts to our food budget which directly impacts the daily lunches members rely on, as well as the amount of offerings available in our food pantry that helps to fight food insecurity. We have cut funding for staff training and vehicle leases. We have deferred facilities maintenance and capital improvement projects to our aging buildings. There simply isn’t anything left to cut without eliminating programs.

We appreciate that in the face of another difficult budget year Governor Lamont has sought to limit the budget impact on people served by my, and other, nonprofits. But after so many years of difficult budgets, there is more to do and we are here to ask you to build upon the Governor’s proposals.

As you know, more than half of the state budget comprises “fixed costs” which are not subject to cuts. That percentage grows each year, and we appreciate the Governor’s tackling those costs. But funding for nonprofits is in whatever remains. The combination of ongoing budget shortfalls and growing fixed costs mean community nonprofits are a shrinking piece of a diminishing pie.

Nonprofits are dependent on the State for funding and have limited options in the face of budget shortfalls. We can’t raise taxes or charges. This is a model that cannot sustain itself – and it puts Connecticut’s quality-of-life at risk.

You can maximize limited state funding by shifting more expensive state-operated programs into the community. The State must decide: either keep the expensive status quo and serve fewer people or change the system and serve more people in need. Community nonprofits can reduce state costs and meet the demand for services if you first take the necessary steps.

Thank you for your time and consideration.