Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Quyen Truong. I am testifying as the Outreach and Evaluation Manager of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board (NCRMHB), and a member of the Connecticut Prevention Council (CPN) and Keep the Promise Coalition (KTP). I am testifying to propose changing how funding is provided for statewide evaluations of mental health and addiction programs.

We understand that you must make some difficult decisions about what programs to cut. But you do not always have the information to understand which programs do well to serve the community and which programs are poorly run. Our agency can offer that information, because we represent the grassroots perspective and we have statutory authority to investigate matters of community concern.

NCRMHB was created by the legislature in 1974 to serve as a community watchdog. Our organization works with community members across the 37 towns in North Central CT to hear their concerns, sound warning bells about issues, and help address issues in the mental health and addiction system. We were, in short, created to review and evaluate DMHAS.

However, a big conflict of interest persists: our organization is funded by the organization we were created to evaluate. This impedes our ability to do our work, especially as budget cuts continue to impact our state. Connecticut still needs a community watchdog over DMHAS programs, one that is not funded by DMHAS. You should consider giving us funding via an agency responsible for community engagement and consumer feedback that can support and sustain our programs, such as the Office of the Healthcare Advocate or Office of Health Strategies.

Moreover, you need to invest in this community watchdog function and fund our agencies. When I started working with NCRMHB almost 6 years ago, most of my time was devoted to meeting with community members and reviewing and evaluating DMHAS programs and getting community feedback. Now, the DMHAS contract will not pay for any time spent on this important statutory function.
During this critical time, when you are debating issues like sports betting, marijuana legalization, an opioid epidemic, and a vaping crisis, our state needs to also invest in prevention and evaluation work. Inviting businesses that promote risky behavior without investment in prevention will result in more mental health and addiction issues. Please consider putting a percentage of the revenues obtained from casinos or marijuana legalization into prevention, treatment and recovery services.

Thank you for your time and consideration.