Testimony of Tregony Simoneau, MD, Co-Director of the Asthma Center at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center to the Appropriations Committee

Regarding Easy Breathing© in HB 7148, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2021, and Making Appropriations Therefor

March 1, 2019

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts about restoring funding for Easy Breathing© in the Department of Public Health’s Budget for Fiscal Years 2020-21.

My name is Tregony Simoneau, MD, the Co-Director of the Asthma Center at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center. I am also a pediatric pulmonologist at Connecticut Children’s and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. I am submitting this testimony as a pediatrician and lung specialist in support of restoring funding for Easy Breathing in the State budget.

Before commenting on the bill, I want to provide some background about Connecticut Children’s. We are a nationally recognized, 187-bed not-for-profit children’s hospital driving innovation in pediatrics. With over 2,600 employees and over 1,100 on our medical staff, we are the only hospital in the State dedicated exclusively to the care of children. Through our partnerships with adult hospitals and primary care providers across Connecticut, we are able to offer a continuum of care for children, from primary prevention to complex disease management, closer to their home. Last year alone, Connecticut Children’s directly cared for more than 15% of all kids in Connecticut covered by Medicaid and spent over $90 million in free and uncompensated care. We are also the primary pediatric teaching hospital for the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and the Frank H. Netter MD School of Medicine at Quinnipiac University and the primary pediatric research partner of Jackson Laboratories.

Asthma is the most common chronic disease of children and the leading cause of school absenteeism. One out of every seven (13.9%) Connecticut public school students has asthma. Asthma also disproportionately affects low income children and children of color. In 2014, when the Department of Public Health last released this data, Connecticut spent over $135 million for acute asthma care of which 76% or $102 million was paid for by public funds through the Medicaid and Medicare programs.

The primary reason for these high costs is the under-recognition of asthma, especially in children, and made worse by inadequate or inappropriate treatment. The Easy Breathing program is a nationally recognized approach developed by Connecticut Children’s in 1998 to improve asthma management and care for children, more recently for adults. Easy Breathing is evidence-based and proven effective at assisting primary care clinicians with the diagnosis of asthma and institution of appropriate asthma therapy.
Between 2002 and 2016, the Easy Breathing program was supported in Connecticut with an annual grant of $250,000 from the Tobacco Settlement Funds. From 2016-2017, it was paid for through the Biomedical Research Trust Fund. However, funding for Easy Breathing was not included in the Fiscal Year 2018-19 budget and was not included in the Governor’s proposed Fiscal Year 2020-21 budget. Without these funds, Connecticut Children’s has been unable to continue the Easy Breathing program, which means no support to expand to new practices, no ongoing feedback and coaching for PCPs, and no coordinator to help providers maintain accurate Asthma Treatment Plans, which serve as the link between the clinician, the family and the school.

We are requesting that funding be restored for this program for the following two reasons:

- **Easy Breathing serves all children in all 169 cities and towns in Connecticut.** To date, more than 159,000 children in the State have been screened for asthma through the Easy Breathing program and more than 44,000 children with asthma have been identified and now receive appropriate asthma treatment. Because they are receiving appropriate treatment, these 44,000 children have fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations. In addition, they miss fewer school days than their non-treated counterparts. Easy Breathing for Schools is a new program which directly improves asthma education of school nurses and includes them in a child’s asthma management. Pilot data from this program has shown a 25% reduction in school absences for children with asthma. However, while prior to 2016 more than 9,000 children were newly enrolled in Easy Breathing each year, since funding ended, enrollment has dropped by more than 66% and in the last six months, only 500 new children were enrolled.

- **Easy Breathing saves Connecticut money.** We have published studies that show for every dollar the State spends on a child with asthma, it saves $3.58 per year in reduced Medicaid spending. Medicaid children enrolled in Easy Breathing in 2015 experienced a 14.5% decrease in hospitalizations for asthma and a 22.2% decrease in ED visits for asthma compared with 2014. This resulted in total cost savings to Medicaid of $2.5 million. Although we have not performed this cost-savings analysis for subsequent years, we are confident that Easy Breathing saves the State at least $1 million each year it is funded.

Easy Breathing is now being used in five other states with similar favorable results. It is a national model for improving asthma care for large numbers of children in a cost effective manner and has won national awards from the Environmental Protection Agency for its success. I urge you to restore funding for this invaluable program in the State budget because it improves the health outcomes for children with asthma and the money it saves Medicaid far exceed the State appropriation that would support the program.

Thank you for your consideration of our position. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Jane Baird, Connecticut Children’s Senior Director of External Relations, at 860-837-5557.