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

My name is Shevonne Browne-Sims and I live in East Hartford. I am here today in my role as a Licensed Professional Counselor at Community Health Center and a parent of a child who has benefitted from services at the SBHC at East Hartford Middle School.

I am here to testify on the Governor’s proposed biennial budget. I am especially concerned about yet another proposed cut of almost $200,000 to the School Based Health Clinics line item in the Department of Public Health (DPH) budget.

I care about children. Every child deserves a chance to be healthy and to reach their full potential in life. But many children have health problems that make it difficult for them to learn and succeed. We want young people in CT to be healthy and thriving. School Based Health Centers (SBHCs) are an effective, integrated and cost-effective way to help young people with their health challenges – including their mental health issues, their physical health concerns, or their oral health challenges. Supporting students with their health challenges where they spend most of their waking hours during the week – right in schools – also contributes to keeping them learning in classrooms, reducing absenteeism and improving graduation rates for youth.

I work with a population who at the elementary age has experienced serious traumatic events such as witnessing violence including death of family members, substance abuse, attempted murders, been involved in house fires, terrible car accidents, and removal from care of parents. I also have the privilege of working with children who have experienced less severe life changes such as separation anxiety, depression and difficulty adjusting to being in a new environment such as
school or moving to a new house. Allow me to share with you 2 stories of individuals who benefitted greatly from counseling services provided through the SBHC. The first story is of a client I saw during the 2017-2018 school year. His teacher made a referral to the SBHC because the student's grades started to decline, was not handing in homework or completing assignments, he was becoming defiant and disrespectful and began experiencing problems with his peers. Because of the SBHC he was able to engage in weekly therapy sessions, followed by weekly group session where he was able to learn strategies to express himself and cope with the family changes that was the main contributor of his emotional dysregulation. The best part is that he is continuing to do well today and is a leader in his classroom.

The second story is my own personal experience. You see, in Aug 0f 2016 my youngest sister died unexpectedly at the age of 23. The timing of her death was devastating to my family especially to my oldest daughter who at the time was preparing to celebrate her 13th birthday. My daughter and her aunt had the best aunt/niece relationship you could imagine. My sister would do my daughter’s hair, paint her nails, dress her up even with nowhere to go and always taught her that a pair of ugly shoes would ruin a good outfit. The death of my sister would also happen 2 weeks prior to the start of my daughter’s 8th grade year at East Hartford Middle School. Being a therapist, I knew and understood the importance of my daughter grieving the loss of her aunt and as a mother I knew in order for my daughter to be able to freely express herself without fear of my mom brain intervening I had to get her outside help. While in the process of seeking a therapist for my daughter, school was starting and I decided to call the social worker at EHMS to let her know what happened and the difficult time my daughter was having. My daughter went from sleeping in her room by herself to sleeping on the floor of her Dad and I’s bedroom every night. No one could mention my sister’s name without my daughter crying inconsolably. The social worker began telling me about mental health counseling that is available through the SBHC with no out of pocket cost to me and they would bill my insurance directly. She explained that my daughter would have access to a licensed or nearly licensed professional who could help her cope effectively with her grief, which eliminated the need for me to find an outside provider, re-arrange schedules, calculate the cost of co-pays and find alternate daycare for my other kids if needed. Because my daughter had access to the SBHC, she was able to
learn how to cope with her grief and able to return to sleeping in her room by herself successfully and can now talk about her aunt with no difficulty.

During the 2017-2018 school year, I managed a caseload of clients that reached 55 over the course of the year. At this time, I am currently servicing approx. 50 students with referrals coming in daily for students who need counseling. With state funding clients who are uninsured or underinsured will be able to access quality care, which will improve treatment outcomes as well as set our leaders of tomorrow up for success in the classroom. I see this funding as an investment into the youngest people in our community that will yield a return in many ways. Funding goes beyond dollars and cents as its impact will include future citizens who are able to work and contribute to the economy, be our future leaders as well as those who will someday be able to give back to the community that provided for them at a crucial phase of life for them.

I urge you to protect the health and wellbeing of our youngest CT residents by supporting the essential and core services that School Based Health Centers provide. Please maintain funding for SBHCs in our state so that young people can continue to thrive and stay in school. This is critical to their future and to the future of our state.

Thank you for supporting School Based Health Centers!