Good Evening,

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Stacy Hankey, a behavioral health clinician working with the elementary population at one of the School Based Health Centers in Meriden, CT for the last nine years. For confidentiality purposes, I prefer to refrain from identifying my specific school location. I am here to testify on H B. 7148 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2021. I would like to share a brief story to show just how critical SBHC’s are in helping students and families within our schools.

Alex and his siblings were referred to the School Based Health Center (SBHC) my first week there. Alex was 8 years old and in third grade at the time. Neither of his parents worked and both struggled with their own mental health and educational issues. The parents had a hard time accepting help from anyone due to lack of trust as well as a pride. They admitted that Alex and his siblings were having trouble at home and at school. They were hesitant about having their children receive behavioral health treatment and did not have transportation to seek out help in the community. The parents were willing to enroll their children in the SBHC because they viewed it as an extension of their school services and it was easy for them to access.

Alex was very guarded when he first started working me. The only way I could get him to interact with me was to play Connect Four with him. I used the game to build rapport with him as well as build up his confidence, as I may have let him win a time or two.
While we were playing Connect Four Alex started to slowly let his guard down. Little by little he let me in on how he was feeling, as well as some of the stressors at home and at school. On a few occasions I had to report some of his concerns about home to the Department of Children and Families. As you can imagine this caused his family to question letting him continue working with me and times it would cause him to shut down again and I would have to start back from square one to earn back his trust.

After getting to know Alex I diagnosed him with depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). During our time together I taught him, his parents, and his teachers coping strategies he could use to help improve his symptoms and his every day life. Eventually, and after many, many games of Connect Four, Alex started to show improvement in school and at home.

When it was time for him to leave elementary school both of us were worried. I tried to convince him that he had the skills he needed to be successful in middle school and anything he did in life. I reminded him that he could also come back to visit me at school if he needed me. On the last day of school I gave him the Connect Four game as a good bye gift. I wrote an inspirational message inside the box cover as well as “Never forget you are the Connect Four King.”

Over the years I continued to work with Alex’s siblings and they would keep me posted on how he was doing. When he was 14 his father called me to inform me that he was “kicked out” of school and was having trouble. A few days later his father unexpectedly showed up to my school and brought Alex with him to visit. Alex looked both terrified and ashamed. When we got to my office he asked if I still had Connect Four and if we can play a quick game. As he and I played he started talking about what happened at his previous school and how he was feeling. He started to smile and no longer looked as terrified. It was at that moment when he father said to me, “I
guess this therapy stuff really works.” Alex went to a therapeutic school from there, and I continued to get updates on how he was doing.

When he was 16 his father called me to inform me that Alex attempted suicide the night before. Fortunately Alex’s father and siblings walked in on him in the middle of the attempt and he survived. Alex’s father said he knew he needed to get him more help and asked me for suggestions. We talked about community supports and I offered to see him at any time if he just needed to check in.

A few months later Alex’s father informed me that Alex was doing better, the entire family was actively involved in church, and Alex was playing the drums for the church band.

A few weeks ago Alex came to visit me unexpectedly. As I ran down the hall to greet him I did not see the child I used to work with. I saw a young man who was almost six feet tall. I had to jump up to hug him. He walked in my office and looked around. He saw the Christmas ornament he made me when he was eight and said “I can’t believe you still have this!” Then he asked if I still had Connect Four. He found the game and reminded me that he was still the Connect Four king. As we played he talked about high school and his plans to be a barber and own his own shop. He asked if I thought he could do it. I encouraged him to follow through on his goals as he beat me yet again at Connect Four. As he left he smiled and said he would be back to visit soon.

It was at that moment that I realized SBHCs are not only a resource for children while they attend the school but we are also a safe place they can return to at any point of their life. Whether they are in crisis, need to check in, or want to sharpen their Connect Four skills. Please consider Alex and thousands of children like him that may not have access to the support they needed if it was not for SBHC’s.

Thank you for your time.