Testimony on HB 7148: AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2021 and Making Appropriations Therefore
Appropriations Committee
Department of Public Health Budget
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The National Association of Social Workers, CT chapter opposes the Governor’s proposed budget reduction of nearly $200,000 in the Department of Public Health’s budget for school-based health centers. SBHC’s are a proven, effective service system that provides physical, mental and in some clinics dental care to children who would otherwise go without health care services. Successful programs that are working as intended and include preventative measures that save the state dollars should not face reductions in appropriations.

According to the National Mental Health Association, less than 1 in 5 of the 12.5 million children in need of mental health services actually receive them. Many of these children will not achieve academic success due to social, emotional and behavioral problems affecting school performance. SBHC’s help these students through means of prevention, early identification, intervention, counseling and support. Especially in both urban and rural communities where many families do not have access to affordable mental health care it is the SBHC’s clinical social worker or other mental health provider that meets the child’s mental health needs.

For many students the SBHC is the only health and mental health service available to them. Comprehensive SBHC’s offer mental health treatment, address acute conditions, provide preventive medical exams, treat injuries, offer oral health care, provide follow-up on chronic conditions and offer health education. Other SBHCs are mental health focused, working with children to cope with the stresses and behavioral issues that impede their ability to learn within the classroom setting. These are services that benefit the student, the student’s family, teachers and the school system by having a healthier student body. For many of the students participating in the SBHC programs, the SBHC is the only medical care they receive.

Today there are more than 100 SBHCs in 26 communities, providing services to over 44,000 students annually, with upwards of half of these visits for mental health. A loss of nearly $200,000 in funding will seriously hamper the work of the SBHCs and put pressure on other community based mental health services that are already stretched beyond capacity for children’s mental health.

Schools do not function in a vacuum. When students cross that school door, they bring with them the life stresses of their family, impacts of poverty, trauma of witnessing violence, fears of being bullied, chronic and acute health problems, and in this economy where so many families are struggling to get by all of the concerns that a student’s family faces press on the student’s mind. All of these factors are obstacles to learning. All of these obstacles are brought into the classroom. The medical and behavioral staff of SBHC’s breaks through these barriers by providing students with a safe place to seek care within the school. This in turn allows students to return to the classroom ready to be productive in their educational learning.
School based health clinics support student health and student learning. They enhance the funds spent on education by assisting students to succeed in school. SBHCs have a long track record of unquestionable success. While we appreciate the fiscal status of the state, it makes no sense in the short or long term to reduce funding to SBHCs when they provide critically important health care services in a cost-effective manner that saves money through delivery of preventative health care. We strongly urge that, at minimum, current funding levels be maintained.