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Willard-Cybulski CI, DOC
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, my name is Melissa Winiarz and I have been working as a Clinical Social Worker for the Department of Correction and UCONN’s Correction Managed Healthcare for the past 9 years. This was not the path I saw myself on when I started my master’s in social work program but it is exactly where I belong. I truly love the work I do. Working with incarcerated individuals is both challenging and rewarding—it is absolutely exhausting, invigorating, and most importantly, it is life changing. I have seen the impact that strong mental health treatment can have on the inmate’s lives—helping them overcome addiction, trauma and a criminal lifestyle. I have also had my life threatened as well as the life of my family and witnessed a man attempted suicide right in front of my eyes. It is not easy work but I am committed to the work I do.

Deficits to the budget have changed the work I have been able to do for the past 9 years. My coworkers and I have been told, “work smarter, not harder” and been pushed far past our limits. We work below minimum staffing and have less resources available while the work remains the same no matter how much money is allotted to complete it. While my facility, Cybulski Correctional Institution, is “fully staffed” the need for mental health services and demands by administration have increased. Nine years ago, my function unit, had another psychologist position, mental health prescriber and 5 more clinical social workers/ professional counselors to complete the same work. In order to manage the budget, positions were eliminated. The lack of funds has meant less mental health staff to the point that we are now past minimum staffing as an everyday norm. My coworkers and I have had had to decrease our facilitation of mental health groups and other duties related to the reintegration units in order to cover Northern Correctional Institution, which is experiencing a critical shortage of mental health staff. Northern is in desperate need – they have a mental health infirmary and more acute mental health patients. The decreased budget has crippled our ability to provide quality mental health treatment in exchange for statistics and saving money.

To quote a coworker of mine, “We can work less with less, or more with more, but we cannot work more with less.” It is imperative for this committee to recognize the need for charges to the budget in order to provide the important mental health treatment to this inmate population. Please give me the opportunity to provide the treatment I was trained to do instead of being overworked with limited resources.