My name is Karen Senich and I am the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury. The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury ("Club") has been providing safe, after school programs for Greater Waterbury’s children and teens for over 130 years. In 2018, the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury served over 500 of Waterbury’s young people. On behalf of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury, our members and their families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my support to H.B. No. 7148 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2021, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR

The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury currently receives support through the Judicial Branch Youth Services Prevention Grant (YSP) (PA 12-247) and Youth Violence Initiative Program (YVPI) (PA 18-81). Both have allowed the Club to expand the programs offered to our members, including our middle and high school members, and expand to expand the Club’s capacity to serve more children.

The Youth Services Prevention funds were allocated to the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury because the Club has a proven impact on the delinquency problems facing the Waterbury. The Club provides athletic and recreational activities; academic and enrichment programs, including tutoring and mentoring; and other preventative and intervention services for youth and their families. The Club also provide positive reinforcement and guidance through outcome focused programing stemming the problems facing today’s youth. By providing a wide range of educational and recreational opportunities, a safe environment, and supportive relationships, the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury helps young people who need it most discover their interests, have a positive outlook for their future, and be confident, successful stewards of their communities. Our programs positively impact the lives of those we serve and are based upon evidence-based best practices in youth development.

Youth Violence Initiative Program is intended to stem the tide of violence occurring in Waterbury and other cities. The Boys & Girls Club provides a healthy and safe environment for our youth and reduces violence among youth. The Club’s programs provide youth the opportunity to learn and develop new skills and interests, including sports, technology and art, during a critical part of the day. Providing the exposure and opportunities to these youth opens the youth to new possibilities in their lives finding positive ways to spend their time and allowing them to explore positive futures – school and career. Keeping students occupied in the after-school hours is proven to reduce at-risk behaviors including violence, substance use and sexual activity.
Our 7th – 12th grade members signed a contract agree to attend the Club regularly and to participate in the programs offered. As a result of their participation and good behavior, they earn gym time to play basketball and gaming time. They have the expectation set and they will have to work for rewards and as a result they are engaged and out of trouble. They are also participating in a program to help them resist gang involvement and violence and use conflict management strategies. The program combats bullying and gang involvement both of which causes behavioral, emotional and academic problems.

The population the Youth Services Prevention Grant and the Youth Violence Prevention Grant serves is our members, boys and girls, ages 5 – 18. Our members represent the diverse population of Waterbury and all are from moderate, low and very low-income households. (over 80% qualify for free or reduced cost lunch). They attend both public and parochial schools in Waterbury. The ethnic breakout last school year was: Latino - 31%; Black - 35%; White - 12%; two or more races – 16%; other – 6%. 57% are from single parent households.

The lack of affordable, educationally beneficial after-school opportunities for many youth, especially those in low-income urban communities, is a decisive factor in explaining the nation’s widening achievement gap. Research indicates that after-school programs not only keep children safe and out of trouble but also significantly improve academic achievement. Youth attending formal after-school programs spend more time in academic activities and enrichment opportunities than do their peers left unsupervised after school. Young people who spend 25-35 hours per week engaged in constructive learning activities during their out-of-school time show better achievement in reading, mathematics and other subjects than their peers. Participation in the Club’s educational programs result in academic proficiency at each grade level and graduation from high school, the ability to make informed decisions about post-secondary education and the development of a lifelong learner. The programs reinforce and enhance the skills and knowledge learned at school. Students do much better in school when they spend their non-school hours engaged in fun, but academically beneficial, activities. School-age youth need additional academic support during after-school hours.

Along with supporting the expansion of these critical programs, the funding provided by the State also allows the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury to maintain the cost of the annual membership at one hundred ($100.00) dollars per school year.

The Youth Services Prevention and Youth Violence Prevention Grants serve to ensure that our members have a safe, positive environment; have fun; supportive relationships; opportunities and expectations; and recognition. All of these programs combine to ensure that our members are provided a positive, impactful experience that, ultimately, leads to positive youth development. The positive outcomes generated by the Club justify the State’s support. Additionally, the State’s support provides critical leverage for non-governmental support. It is in the best interest of the young people and the greater Waterbury community that the Boys & Girls Club continues to provide a safe after-school environment. I strongly urge you to continue to fund the Youth Services Prevention grant and Youth Services Prevention Program.