Testimony of Glenn Focht, MD
President of the Connecticut Children’s Specialty Group
to the Appropriations Committee
Regarding House Bill 7148 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending
June Thirtieth, 2021, and Making Appropriations Therefor
March 5, 2019

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for
the opportunity to speak with you regarding the Department of Social Services budget. My name
is Dr. Glenn Focht and I am President of the Connecticut Children’s Specialty Group. I am here
today to share some thoughts about the challenges faced by children in behavioral health crisis
and how Connecticut Children's ability to address their needs depends upon our relationship with
the HUSKY program.

The children and young adults of Connecticut are increasingly unable to access behavioral
healthcare. Solving this crisis requires a solid partnership between clinical experts, like the
physicians and nurses who care for children every day in Connecticut Children’s Emergency
Department and government agencies like the Department of Social Services.

Three factors are currently increasing the gap between the care children need and Connecticut’s
ability to provide it. First, the national 10+ year pattern of increased suicidality in adolescents
and young adults is making the care we provide more complex, more expensive and more
dependent upon care coordination to get children the services they need once they are
discharged. Unfortunately, much of the care Connecticut Children’s provides to these patients,
including care coordination, is not reimbursable by HUSKY and this puts a strain on the care we
provide to all children.

Second, Connecticut’s supply of pediatric inpatient psychiatric beds decreased in 2018. Last
year, nearly 3,900 children and adolescents required emergency evaluation services in our
Emergency Department and almost 15% of them remained in our ED for more than 24 hours. In
some cases, their discharge was delayed because they needed to be transferred to a psychiatric
inpatient facility and no bed was available. Last year’s bed reduction has exacerbated this
problem.

In other cases, the patient’s ability to be safely discharged required an existing source of
behavioral health care in their community and they lacked access to that resource. In January,
Connecticut Children’s launched a new behavioral health transitions clinic to connect patients in
psychiatric crisis with a care team the next day, if needed, to reduce the likelihood that they will
return to our ED in crisis.
Antiquated HUSKY policies that decrease access to care is a third cause of this crisis. I will share two examples. First, HUSKY does not support use of telemedicine technology for behavioral healthcare. Telemedicine for pediatric behavioral health care delivery is safe and effective and endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and the American Telemedicine Association. Care delays for many of our children could be dramatically reduced if HUSKY adopted telepsychiatry.

Second, Connecticut Medicaid continues to require prior authorizations and other administrative hurdles for behavioral health care. These requirements do not exist for the care of medical conditions and they are inconsistent with the 2008 Mental Health Parity Act and parity provisions of the Affordable Care Act. The State should remove these unnecessary burdens as soon as possible.

Much more work needs to be done in order to provide children and adolescents with the access to care that they deserve. Connecticut Children’s welcomes the opportunity to partner with the State to change payment policies and encourage investment in a true behavioral health system that would better meet the needs of our patients and their families.

All of this brings me back to the State budget. More than half of Connecticut Children’s patients rely on HUSKY and adequate funding helps ensure that all children can access our robust programs and services that promote their emotional and physical health. Connecticut Children’s and the State must forge a strong partnership so that we can continue to provide the care that is critical for Connecticut’s future.