Appropriations Committee Hearing Testimony
In Support of HB7118
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Research - Currently my laboratory is funded by two RO1 awards from the National Institutes of Health (~$500,000 in direct costs per year). We study cilia - organelles that play key roles in signaling and motility in humans and other organisms. Defects in these structures lead to broad and often devastating effects in mammals including, infertility, blindness, polycystic kidneys, some epilepsies and obesity, as well as developmental disorders in brain formation, skeletal abnormalities, progressive blindness and many others. Our work focuses on two main areas: 1) we study the molecular motor proteins that allow cilia (and sperm flagella) to move and thereby propel cells and set up fluid flows and gradients. Our second project (in collaboration with Betty Eipper at UConn Health) looks at the role of cilia in secreting peptides and other bioactive molecules to allow for cell-cell communication. This is a very new area of research that we have just had funded by the NIH.

Impact of High Fringe Benefit Rates - The enormous fringe liability places UConn faculty at a massive competitive disadvantage when applying for federal and other grants. As the current Chair of the Research Council (a governance council at UConn Health) this problem has been brought to my attention by many colleagues and discussed at our council meetings with senior UConn officials. It is my opinion that this is by far the most serious problem facing researchers at UConn Health. Simply put, the standard NIH RO1 award usually provides approximately $250,000 or so in direct costs per year - currently I hold two of these awards. I should note that in my experience the National Institute of General Medical Sciences at NIH reduces the actual RO1 grant awarded to ~$250,000/year irrespective of the amount originally requested (which would include the full salary and fringe for all personnel needed to perform the work). Salaries account for probably 80% or more of these costs. As the fringe rate for unionized research staff and postdoctoral fellows is now ~70%, which I understand is higher than at almost all other academic institutions in the US, this means that the number of people we can have in the lab actively working on a project is much less than at other institutions (including others in CT and the North East). This directly and dramatically impacts productivity which of course then directly impacts on grant renewals etc as the amount of progress/publications achieved is far less than would otherwise be so. I have personally received comments on a NIH grant review where the reviewer literally did not believe that the indicated/requested fringe rates were real as they are so far out of the normal range, and then of course that person made highly negative comments concerning the budget - given the ultra-competitive nature of NIH grant funding, this type of response almost guarantees an application will not get funded. I would urge the legislature to act to reduce the unfunded fringe liability charged to research grants as it will have a direct and demonstrable impact on our ability to actually perform ground-breaking biomedical research and greatly enhance future grant funding prospects.