Testimony of Ashley Kalinauskas, CEO

Re: UConn Health Budget

Appropriations Committee
March 7, 2019

My name is Ashley Kalinauskas and I am the founder and CEO of Torigen Pharmaceuticals, Inc. a company located at the UConn Technology Incubation Program (TIP) at 400 Farmington Ave., in Farmington, CT.

I was born and raised in Connecticut, attending UConn for my undergraduate degree before moving to Indiana to pursue my graduate degree at the University of Notre Dame (don’t worry, UConn basketball will always be #1). While at Notre Dame, I landed in a unique opportunity to launch a company based on my graduate research alongside my professor. Our technology is a method for creating personalized cancer immunotherapies to treat soft-tissue tumors, which we launched into the veterinary space to help the 8 million companion animals diagnosed with cancer each year in the United States.

While the startup community was just beginning to grow in South Bend, as a young entrepreneur with limited finances, I decided to move back home to Connecticut. Upon moving home, I truly realized the extent of the resources that entrepreneurs have available to them here in Connecticut—from TIP to Connecticut Innovations and university connections.

TIP combines state of the art wet lab space with mentors that position companies for success. After moving into a small lab at TIP, we began applying for funding through the UConn Innovation Fund and Connecticut Innovations. We worked hard and secured pre-seed convertible debt financing from both institutions. With that came amazing mentors and a connection to a UConn immunology professor, Dr. Lawrence Silbart who decided to complete a sabbatical with Torigen from May-December 2017. This has led to multiple sponsored research agreements with his laboratory up at Storrs along with applying for NIH SBIR funding together.

Connecticut Innovations has been another great resource for startup companies looking for funding to position themselves in the state. They have been remarkable to work with and truly have the best interests of the company in mind with advice and connections. While TIP and Connecticut Innovations are not directly related, the majority of biotech companies at TIP have received funding from them, proving the strict vetting process that UConn employs when selecting which companies to allow into their program.
In January of this year, we had secured an additional $2.3M of financing led by Connecticut Innovations with prominent angels across the state participating. This was only possible because of the years of hard work that the company put in, advancements in research due to our laboratories and the connections that we were able to gain by being a part of the UConn community.

With this funding, we now have 5 full-time employees in Farmington and we support 3 UConn senior interns. Due to our research, university connections and laboratory space, we were able to successfully recruit a star researcher from the University of Michigan to join our team and move across the country to join us.

This is just one company example of how a space like TIP leads to funding opportunities, attracts top talent, creates jobs and moves people into the state, but I see this every day in the companies that surround ours.

TIP and the university have created a startup ecosystem where the surrounding companies fuel each other to succeed. By continuing to fund UConn Health, UConn and the Technology Incubation Program, you are keeping talent in-state and attracting more everyday.

I would welcome any state legislative members to come and see the amazing companies that we have at TIP. By continuing to fund this program, you are allowing for the nation’s top technologies to grow within Connecticut.