Dear Co-Chairman Fonfara, Co-Chairman Rojas, Ranking Member Witkos, Ranking Member Davis, Vice Chair Cassano, Vice Chair Leone, Vice Chair Concepcion, Vice Chair Meskers and the rest of the distinguished members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee:

Once again I am writing to implore you to PLEASE vote NO on sales tax for massage therapy. HB7410 is being presented as an alternative to the governor’s bill, SB877. Unfortunately, massage therapy is still being considered as a revenue stream through sales tax.

Massage therapy is healthcare. I can not overstate that.

In March of 2015, I had meniscal surgery to repair my right knee. The MRI showed three vertical tears. Once the surgeon was inside, his scope revealed worse damage from those than expected AND a complete horizontal laceration of the meniscus in my right knee. I was told, upon awaking from anesthesia, that I would never regain the ability to crawl/weight my right knee. The style of massage I specialize in, thai massage, has me on my knees at least six hours a day, crawling on the mat and using my bodyweight to encourage a better range-of-motion for my clients, as well as tractioning their joints, opening the soft tissue with rhythmic compressions, employing sustained ischemic compressions and stretching the muscles. Not weighting my knee meant the end of my career.

Massage was my saving grace. Within 48 hours of surgery, I was receiving massage and over four weeks post-operative, I saw a variety of massage therapists to employ different techniques and styles that had me not only weight-bearing within four weeks, but at full heel-to-glutes flexion of the knee and crawling on the mat and working a full-time schedule! I completely credit massage. As do my surgeon and my physical therapist, who were completely surprised by my complete and speedy recovery.

My massage was paid for out-of-pocket. My health insurance did not cover massage therapy. Now, four years later, we have an HSA that DOES let me put aside pre-tax dollars to pay for my acupuncture and massage. This clearly says to me that massage is recognized as healthcare!

My one small instance is just that; a finite instance where massage helped me maintain my profession and improved my recovery. I have hundreds of clients that could say the same in anecdotal situations for them.

But let’s look at the financial impact for a Licensed Massage Therapist (LMT).

If an LMT is employed at a chain massage club or a spa, they will most likely look at 15-20 hours of work per week; this includes NO health care benefits, paid leave for illness or vacation, very little (if any) reimbursement for the REQUIRED continuing education that the LMT must take annually and they will need five or more years experience to earn over $17/hour. At 20 hours per week and 50 weeks per year? That is a pre-tax income of $17,000! Almost ALL of these LMTs are working two or more jobs; many will have a personal business
that they maintain for out-calls or on-site corporate chair massage to supplement the employment income. Or, they work outside the industry or in a complimentary field. Most won’t earn over $35,000 annually.

If an LMT is self-employed, the numbers may appear slightly better on the surface, but I can assure you that the VERY rare LMT who has been in business over 20 years is earning close to $50,000 or more. And that is usually if they employ or sub-let space to other health professionals and are able to earn off that professional’s income as well. Assume the standard one-hour massage is $75 in CT and most self-employed LMTs will do 20 hours of hands-on per week. Still noting, NO health care, no paid time off, no sick days, no vacation and no reimbursement for REQUIRED continuing education annually. So, that $75,000 gross gets 1/3 to self-employment taxes. We are now at $45,900 and have to pay rent, laundry, oils/lotions, liability insurance, personal health care insurance, utilities, continuing education, professional membership fees, advertising and marketing, website and cell service, possible scheduling software fees and a CPA/bookkeeper. Suddenly, that $45,900 drops to much closer to $30,000, at best. And this is only saying 20 hours of hands-on; for every hour of hands-on, there is at least 15-30 minutes of non-hands on time with SOAP notes, accounting, cleaning, office maintenance, social media updates, client contacts, check-in and check-out of clients, follow-up on outstanding invoices, etc etc etc. Those hours, although necessary as a small business owner, are unreimbursed. And, as an added insult to the low-income an LMT can expect? We are the butt of jokes about happy-endings and deal with inappropriate and ignorant clients often.

LMTs, when setting up offices and legitimate businesses, are subject to criminal background checks, fingerprinting, additional fees and permits; each municipality can add additional requirements for a massage business because ‘massage’ is used as a cover for illicit businesses that are trafficking humans. All this so that we can help people relieve stress, relax tense muscles, calm anxiety and feel a bit better as they live their lives. And most LMTs absolutely love what they do and would not trade their work for any other career.

There are studies that show the effects of stress on the human body; the high blood pressure, the increased levels of cortisol in the blood, the poor sleep, the short-tempers. Massage has been shown to combat all of these by stimulating the Vagus Nerve, which inspires the Parasympathetic Nervous System (rest and digest). By allowing the underlying nervous system to relax and refresh, massage is affecting the human body at a cellular level that no other treatment can touch. While a physician, chiropractor or physical therapist can see the body, assess, diagnose an issue and recommend a course of treatment, often they miss the ‘full wellness’ picture of how other factors are being affected and influence the patient.

As massage is a direct access therapy, clients can seek massage for an immediate injury (headache, back ache from travel, neck ache from poor sleep, shoulder soreness from a workout) or they can be seeing an LMT for on-going treatment of chronic issues (sports and occupational injuries, long-term stress, systemic conditions, chronic pain, anxiety, postural distortions). This is so important to our clients and to our relationship with each individual.

If sales tax is collected, I shall now need to determine who will pay when my clients are using their health insurance to cover the massage. This is a covered benefit. But health insurance will not cover sales tax. I receive most referrals from acupuncturists, chiropractors and physical therapists; none of these professions have prescribing rights within Connecticut. So, offering that IF massage is prescribed to avoid sales tax is also not a proper solution.

When I am doing on-site corporate chair massage, I shall now need to determine a new, lower rate for my services so that I can include the tax in the $1/minute rate I charge OR I will need to now deal with coins and change in the less-than-30-seconds-turnover between clients while I am cleaning the chair, sanitizing my hands and greeting a new client. And I can almost guarantee that I will lose the corporate businesses that pay for their employees to receive chair
massage as a benefit; they see this as falling under their employee health care. They won’t pay sales tax on health care services.

How will I handle HSA payments? These pre-tax benefits won’t cover sales tax; as such, a client will need to bring additional funds to pay for a health benefit. We do not request this of their eye doctor for new glasses or their dentist for a fluoride treatment. But an HSA will cover these fees. And, now I shall need to itemize receipts to show the treatment cost as well as the sales tax and owe each was paid individually. That is adding more work and bookkeeping.

I can tell you that I, for one, will stop offering free massage at events such as Massage Therapy Awareness Day here at the Capitol and various health fairs. No other healthcare provider will have to pay sales tax on their services out-of-pocket for volunteer events. But being required to do so? I shall simply stop that volunteerism. Which is one of the more rewarding parts of my outreach.

For that matter, offering free massage at events like The Hartford Marathon, the Manchester Road Race and the numerous 5K, 10K and fun runs throughout the state will get messy. Athletes do not carry money while they compete in these races and by requiring sales tax on massage, now the volunteer LMTs will be required to keep track of each session length and having to pay sales tax from their personal income. Which is already limited. So not only does the LMT lose a day of income to volunteer at these events, but now it will cost them personal money to volunteer.

This is an undue burden and unfair to require ANY health care provider to meet these requirements. You are imposing more challenges to small business owners (a great majority of whom are women) and to self-employed health care providers. I understood that Connecticut is in support of small business and in support of encouraging residents to better health and wellness. This would be a step backwards that is unnecessary and unfair on both fronts.

In my letter and testimony about SB877, I focused on the research and the way in which massage is being used in the greater health care industry. Medicare is using massage now and recommending that physicians are educated on the benefits of massage and open to referring to massage for pain management. There is research showing that massage has helped in chronic pain management, as an option to opioids. Massage improves recovery and healing after injuries and surgery; decreases the effects of stress on the nervous system; improves digestion and restorative sleep. There are many studies showing these as well as additional benefits. I refer you to www.amtamassage.org for the links to research and the AMTA position statements.

I implore you to reconsider the inclusion of massage as a sales tax item. You are doing a disservice to our field and to the status of massage therapists in the state. Not to mention, you will create more difficult and challenging access to a necessary health benefit.

Sincerely,

Nicole RG Arel, CT LMT #4433
AMTA-CT Chapter Government Relations Chair
AMTA-CT Chapter National Delegate
200-Hour RYT