Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-750
Title: AN ACT CONCERNING THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF MENTAL ILLNESS AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.
Vote Date: 3/14/2019
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 2/14/2019
File No.: 

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Senator Looney, 11th Dist.
Senator Moore, 22nd Dist.
Senator Duff, 25th Dist.
Et al.

REASONS FOR BILL:

To establish a task force that would study current resources available to students suffering from mental illness, and then recommend a state-wide policy regarding mental illness services for students of higher education.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Alexandra Beaudoin, Director of Government Relations, Connecticut State Colleges and Universities: Alexandra Beaudoin testified on behalf of Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) in favor of SB 750. CSCU already has several prevention and treatment programs in place and looks forwards to improving and expanding them through this bill. CSCU stresses the importance of this bill, especially for low-income or first generation students.

Eleanor JB Daugherty, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, Dean of Students, University of Connecticut: UConn supports SB 750 and believes that tools for mental illness prevention should be introduced to students far before their post-secondary education; it needs to begin in the K-12 system and then continue into higher education to improve effectiveness. UConn also argues that they need increased funding in order to continue to improve their mental health services.
NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Multiple people testified in support of SB 750, but recommend additional language that would include mandatory evidence-based mental health programs on college campuses. Derek Pan states that “we should move to expand evidence-based mental health educational outreach and awareness programs alongside the treatment and resources provided in order to fulfill a comprehensive approach.”

- Valaie English Cooper, Mental Health First Aid Instructor
- Derek Pan, Part I, Part II, Part III

Multiple speakers testified in strong support of SB 750. Mental well-being is a necessity among students and should be treated as such. Students’ accessibility to prevention and treatment resources for mental illness must be improved in order to remove the barriers caused by mental illness that gets in the way of students’ success, as well as eliminate social stigmas. It is argued that this bill is the first step we need to enact change. State-level advocacy and assistance is what the mental health centers in Connecticut colleges and universities need in order to improve and expand, as well as educate students on the issue of mental illness.

- Jeffrey M. Burda, Director of Counseling and Psychological Services, University of Hartford
- Diane Frost
- Dennis Mem

Michaela I. Fissel, Assistant Executive Director, Advocacy Unlimited, Inc.: Michaela Fissel supports SB 750, and recommends that the language of the bill be changed in order to “humanize the experience of emotional distress.” Ms. Fissel also asks for “mandatory social emotional learning experiences that include stress-mitigation techniques for incoming students.” With these changes, she believes that SB 750 could be successful.

Kathleen Flaherty, Executive Director, Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc.: Kathleen Flaherty supports SB 750, and states that institutions of higher education must fully understand the legal obligation they have towards their students suffering from mental illness. “Students living with mental health conditions qualify as disabled under the law; they are entitled to reasonable accommodations of their disability.” An institutions provision of adequate mental health care to students is not only a moral obligation, but a legal obligation.

Susan Kelley, Director of Advocacy and Policy, National Alliance on Mental Illness Connecticut: Susan Kelley supports SB 750, but believes that this bill is only a first step and there is more that needs to be done. She recommends the training of university faculty and staff in Mental Health First Aid, as well as educating students on different coping techniques to create a culture that promotes student well-being.

Darius Burke: Darius Burke testified in support of the bill, but believes that it should be made illegal for educators and students to bully those with mental illness in order for a bill like SB 750 to succeed in full.

Sarah Donovan: Sarah Donovan supports SB 750 and expressed her concerns regarding the limited resources that colleges and universities are left with for their mental health.
centers. She believes that these limited resources are leading to school psychiatrists over-prescribing medications without appropriate medical supervision or therapeutic follow-ups.

**David S. Woodworth**: David Woodworth supports SB 750 and makes additional recommendations that all schools must hire “Peer Support Specialists,” make two counselors available to students, and share local mental health and substance abuse services during freshman orientations.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Jennifer Widness, President, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges**: Jennifer Widness states that “the scope of this proposed bill is unclear.” Ms. Widness argues that institutions of higher education are already well aware of the issue regarding mental health among students and have responded accordingly. “All our member institutions offer a wide range of prevention programs and treatment options at both residential and non-residential campuses.”

Reported by: Beatrice O’Neil  Date: 03/27/2019