

Testimony in Support of House Bill 6540
AN ACT CONCERNING THE PREVENTION OF HIV

By Jim Pettinelli
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To the distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

I respectfully submit the following testimony in support of H.B. 6540, *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV*. I am a longtime advocate, currently working with Liberty Community Services, in New Haven.

Liberty Community Services began operating in New Haven in 1987 and originally named the Connecticut AIDS Residence Program (“CARP”), our focus was providing housing for people living with HIV/AIDS. We changed our name in the 1990’s and expanded our focus to serve those living with HIV, dealing with mental health issues, substance use disorders or other chronic health issues. Our continuum of housing and support services includes over 12 core programs and serves over 1,000 individuals annually – focusing on three primary areas: *housing, health, and income*. At any point in time, Liberty provides housing and housing supportive services to more than 250 individuals with a retention rate of +95%. Our efforts are implemented with the intention of offering sustainable housing opportunities, employment, and supports for people who have been homeless so that we are a stronger community, where everyone has housing and can sustain it. The goals of Liberty are to: 1.) help people who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of being homeless secure and maintain permanent housing, and; 2.) provide essential services to support people maintain their housing. With our talented staff, board, volunteers and community partners each day we’re working to offer *hope, meaning*, and the necessary *confidence* to help clients and tenants succeed. We believe we are making progress to end homelessness – working to make it rare, brief, and non-recurring. Liberty’s services are inclusive, culturally competent, and evidence-based. We believe that with tools like these we can continue to make a difference in our collective work to end homelessness in Greater New Haven.

Since the late 1980’s much of my work as a professional has been focused on the finding the best approaches to meet the educational and primary needs of those living with HIV disease, and those at risk of HIV. In addition to my efforts here at Liberty, I’ve worked over the years as part of teams establishing programs in Massachusetts with the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, AIDS Housing Corporation which also provided national technical support, Victory Programs in Boston, the American Red Cross of Greater New York, and with the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS at the Yale School of Public Health.

I believe the proposed bill is important because youth who are at substantial risk of HIV infection cannot consent to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a prescription-based daily medication for the prevention of HIV, without parental consent. When taken daily,

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the pill (brand name Truvada) reduces the risk of HIV infection by up to 92%. Instead, youth can only consent to treatment after an HIV diagnosis. This bill would ensure that youth at risk for HIV have direct access to prophylaxis before they are burdened with life-long illness and treatment. Even with the amazing progress in HIV treatment, HIV remains a significant public health concern. More than 10,000 people are living with HIV in Connecticut.¹ Young gay and bisexual men of color are particularly at risk.² There is still no cure available for HIV, and treatment is complex, expensive, and life-long. By allowing minors to consent to PrEP, we would reduce the risk of HIV infection.

This bill would update existing state law to prevent the transmission of HIV among young people. Currently, minors may receive HIV treatment without parental consent³ – but they cannot independently consent to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a medication used to prevent HIV transmission in the first place. *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV* would implement a targeted provision to address this harmful gap by adding language to Conn. Gen. Stat. § 19a-592.

Stigma, homophobia, and privacy concerns pose obstacles to HIV related testing and treatment for youth. Many of the youth who would most benefit from PrEP are unable to access it due to fear of parental rejection. Allowing youth to consent would foster trusting relationships between young people and adult providers by opening new avenues for preventative care. Providers may also serve as entry points to resources and support for talking to family members or other trusted adults about issues related to HIV, sexual health, and identity.

Over the years – I have seen firsthand that increasing access SAVES LIVES! We have the tools to make a difference, and at this time – your action is necessary. I strongly support H.B. 6540 and I urge you to vote favorably for this important bill. No young person should have to wait until after contracting HIV to access care. Your support will protect the health and safety of Connecticut’s children. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



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¹ Connecticut Department of Public Health (2019), *HIV in Connecticut: Data Reported Through 2018*, <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DPH/HIV-Surveillance/CT-HIV-Fact-Sheet.pdf?la=en>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), *HIV and Young Men Who Have Sex with Men*, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/sexualbehaviors/pdf/hiv_factsheet_ymsm.pdf

³ Conn. Gen. Stat. §19a-592