Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Valerie English Cooper, and I am a Mental Health First Aid instructor. I am submitting testimony regarding the need for evidence-based mental health programs on college campuses.

Nearly one in five adolescents and adults has a mental health or substance use disorder in any given year. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable: 50% of chronic mental illness begins by age 14, 75% by age 24. Despite the prevalence of mental health problems among Connecticut youth, only about 1 out of 5 college students with a mental health or substance use problem seek help in any given year. A significant risk of mental illness is suicide. Two-thirds of students who have thoughts of suicide tell a friend rather than seek help or tell an older adult.

How do we encourage college youth to reach out for help? One thing we know is that people are more likely to seek help if encouraged to do so by someone they know and trust.

Whether or not Mental Health First Aid increases help-seeking behavior was the central question of SAMHSA’s Project AWARE, a nationwide grant initiative funded by Congress and fielded to over 200 grantee organizations from 2015-2018.

Mental Health First Aid, or “CPR for the mind” is an international training managed in the U.S. by the National Council for Behavioral Health. Mental Health First Aid teaches participants how to recognize and offer help to someone who might be developing a mental health or substance use problem, or experiencing a mental health crisis. Research has shown that Mental Health First Aid training 1.) increases mental health literacy, 2.) reduces stigma, 3.) increases participants’ confidence in reaching out to help, 4.) increases awareness of local mental health resources, 5.) increases participants’ awareness of their own mental health needs, and 6.) increases referrals to professional care.

I have trained nearly 2000 Connecticut residents, 139 at the UConn Storrs campus. Our research replicate international evidence for the training. As a result of the training, UConn participants felt significantly more confident that they could:
- Recognize signs of a mental health/substance use problem or crisis (96%).
- Reach out to help (98%).
- Ask someone if they had thoughts of suicide (93%).
- Guide someone to professional help (99%).
- Guide someone to community, peer, or personal supports (98%).
Mental Health First Aid is evidence-based internationally, in the U.S., and on Connecticut college campuses.

I support SB 750, and ask the Committee to include language requiring that prevention and treatment programs on college campuses be evidence-based. Pursuant to the Mental Health Reform Act of 2016, there should be parity between mental and physical health prevention and treatment programs/practices relative to evidence supporting their use.

Thank you for your support of Connecticut youth’s mental health.

* SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)