

Testimony of Rhonda Boisvert
President, Connecticut Association of Residential Care Homes
Re: H.B. No. 6446 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMAN SERVICES.
Human Services Committee Public Hearing, March 4, 2021

Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Berthel, Representative Case and Members of the Human Services Committee: My name is Rhonda Boisvert and I am the President of the Connecticut Association of Residential Care Homes (CARCH). **I am here today to testify against the rate cap on residential care homes in Section 8 of House Bill 6446- An Act Concerning the Governor's Budget Recommendations for Human Services.**

On behalf of CARCH and the many residents and staff that live and work in our homes, we urge the committee and legislature to increase our rates and provide a wage increase for our workers.

Residential Care Homes care for some of the most vulnerable people in the state with the majority of our residents having mental health diagnoses and many having other ailments. The pandemic was a particularly challenging time for our residents and staff as our homes are congregate settings with shared living spaces. Our employees worked on the frontlines during the pandemic for wages slightly above minimum wage. Our administrators and experienced staff often covered additional shifts and at times worked 80 plus hours due to the lack of available staff. And most of our residents spent months in lockdown with limited contact outside the home and some becoming ill with the virus.

We are urging you to support this industry immediately. We need an across-the-board rate increase of at least 5% in each of the next two fiscal years. We also are urging an across the board \$1 per hour increase for every employee in every facility beginning July 1, 2021. These workers are vastly under paid and we need to speed up the pace in getting them over the pending \$15 minimum wage. The time is now to do that after they stepped up during the pandemic and cared for some of the most vulnerable individuals in the state.

PLEASE REMEMBER THIS: THE LAST MAJOR RATE INCREASE FOR RESIDENTIAL CARE HOMES WAS 4% IN 2006! FOR THE LAST TWELVE YEARS (SINCE STATE FISCAL YEAR 2010), MOST HOMES HAVE RECEIVED VIRTUALLY NO INCREASES EXCEPT PERHAPS FOR A FAIR RENT ADJUSTMENT.

The industry cannot continue like this. How have many homes survived? By eliminating health benefits for employees, doing away with any pension plan, cutting back on nice but not essential expenses, reducing staff if possible and therefore attention to residents and, of course, not providing adequate compensation to employees.

The Governor's budget related to Residential Care Homes does not fully appreciate this work and the need for our homes to see a significant rate increase and a raise for our workers. Instead, it seeks to shift state spending on residential care homes to Medicaid without appropriately reinvesting most of those funds into the industry. This is especially troubling when we don't yet know what our rates will look like under this new proposed model.

That is not enough when the minimum wage has increased and our employees often leave for higher paying jobs in nursing homes, mental health facilities, Department of Developmental Services group homes whose employees start at \$14.75 and workers at Target, Walmart, Amazon and the many grocers who start at \$15 or higher.

Most Residential Care Homes have starting salaries closer to \$12 or \$13 and even those wages can be a stretch. Finding good new employees who will commit long-term is almost impossible.

The pandemic came in the wake of years of rate freezes. The lack of investment was felt as staffing was an issue throughout the pandemic. Many staff and administrators worked 70-80 hours as other staff was out with the virus or needed to quarantine. The Department of Public Health's distribution of PPE was instrumental for many homes but other expenses throughout the pandemic surged.

The Department of Social Services provided a small one-time three month increase in rates from March, 2020 through June, 2020 but despite several requests we have seen no additional financial support. Unlike other providers we do not receive Medicaid dollars from the state so did not see those federal increases.

We think homes should be allowed to bill Medicaid for certain services but oppose any reductions in state spending on rates at a time when the industry is hurting so badly. For instance, almost all homes administer medication, a Medicaid billable service, so instead of trying to create a whole new rate and billing system, why not start by allowing us to bill for medication administration on July 1, 2021 without any rate reduction.

We would urge the Human Services Committee to amend HB6446 to:

- (1) Raise all Residential Care Home rates 5% in both FY22 and FY23.
- (2) Increase every employee's pay \$1/hour for FY22.
- (3) Permit RCHs to bill Medicaid for medication administration starting July 1, 2021 without decreasing a home's rate.

Please support residential care home funding and raise our rates so that we can keep our great employees and invest in our homes and our residents.