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Before the Labor Committee

In Support of SB 1002: AN ACT CONCERNING LABOR ISSUES RELATED TO COVID-19, PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT AND OTHER STAFFING MATTERS and In Support of HB 6595: AN ACT CONCERNING LABOR MATTERS RELATED TO COVID-19, PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT AND OTHER STAFFING ISSUES

Good Morning Senator Kushner, Representative Porter and members of the Committee, My name is Julio Reyes and I work in Young Adult Services at the River Valley Services location. I am here today to testify on Senate Bill 1002 and House Bill 6595.

I have dedicated my professional life to helping young people with mental health challenges. The work that I do has been my greatest source of insight into what it means to be vulnerable and how close we may all be sometimes to approaching tragedy. The people I work with have often survived extreme circumstances at a young age. This fact sets them on a path fraught with compounding challenges. Trauma rewires the brain so that it becomes less effective in school and on the job and makes forming and navigating relationships difficult. The conditions these young people live in are at or near poverty, with the poor health outcomes that accompany life without enough money.

As healthcare workers we try to help our people shoulder these struggles. We share their trauma vicariously. We get injured, and we get sick. Over the past year of the pandemic, healthcare workers have accounted for 25 percent of those who suffered serious illness due to COVID. I was infected myself and passed the infection to my daughter. Thankfully, I can say I am more fortunate than some I know and work with who have paid more dearly and some who have not survived.

They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; and the next best time is today. A visit to the OSHA website will quickly yield this quote (for those that care to check) :

"More workers are injured in the healthcare and social assistance industry sector than any other. "

Years ago (more than 20) the state of Connecticut recognized this fact and paid our healthcare workers a hazard pay.

Today I come before you to say that if being a hero means that my sacrifice will not be recognized - because we expect heroes to sacrifice and to be selfless; If I cease to be seen as a person with the same needs and fears and desires as everyone - a man with a family and a pile of bills at home who doesn't want to get sick; If it means going back to business as usual, then please don't call me a hero.

In the light of this disastrous pandemic we have seen people go to work because they had to. Some jobs can't be done remotely and happen to be essential for the functioning of our society. Before the pandemic they were jobs that are often looked down upon or ignored. Suddenly we were being called heroes because we took a risk and helped to hold the frontline. Many of us are eager to go back to normal, tired of wearing masks or dealing with public health protocol. Will we return to the normal of taking our essential workers for granted. Or will we begin a new normal - one that is more just and considers our shared humanity?

The best time would've been 20 years ago. Today is your chance as lawmakers to make it -- not right-- but better. Please pass Senate Bill 1002 and House Bill 6595. Thank you for your time.