



MARCH 25, 2021
Human Services Committee
Public Hearing on:

H.B. 6636 An Act Concerning COVID-19 and Enhanced Federal Medicaid Funding

Good afternoon Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie, Senator Berthel, Representative Case and members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Heather LaTorra, the President and CEO of Marrakech. We provide services through DDS, DMHAS, DCF, DSS, DPH and others Statewide, and this is our 50th Anniversary. I have been working at Marrakech for the past 35 years along with over 720 staff, and have been here too many times to count and in front of most of you.

I would like to take this time to thank you for continuing to hear us, work with us, champion on our behalf and partner with us to ensure that Connecticut's private nonprofit service delivery system offers exceptional and innovate services and supports for people with IDD, Mental Health issues, homelessness, youth in the foster care system, people with autism, addiction and/or acquired brain injuries, etc.

We have reached a dangerous plateau – In just 6 days we will have spent every penny of relief funds we once received through our state funders and the Federal CRF. However we continue to have increased costs due to COVID including the purchase and distribution of PPE, physical modifications for vehicles and program sites for safety and social distancing and in addition there are the overtime costs and unpaid staffing services we are providing due to many of our residents remaining home instead of attending outside day services.

We did lose staff because the risks they are taking are not compensated for and recruiting in this space right now is the worse I have ever seen. We have 20% staff vacancy rate, which is unheard of for us. We have new referrals, school age out graduates and people who have lost their day programs on our waiting list for services right now until we can hire and train more employees. That is right, in this job market our sector is having a hard time onboarding employees.

Despite this I am optimistic today because I know that this bill HB 6636 in relation to the American rescue plan, is our chance to fix our system short term and long term, and I am more hopeful today than ever. This is a moment we have all been waiting for.

Typically it is the lack of resources in the State that keeps us underfunded and from earning any COLAs, such as for the past 14 years. This vicious cycle keeps our staff underpaid with just basic benefits that come out of their pockets more and more, year after year, with no future savings or pension plan. Yet these are the staff, more than 70% black or brown at Marrakech, who left their families to move into our congregate living sites to stop COVID in its tracks in less than 2

weeks. These are our staff who have been working decades due to the relationships they have built, and who selflessly come to work during the pandemic every day without a promise of increased pay, even to work with people who tested positive for COVID.

This is the lack of resources in the state that keeps us underfunded and unable to take every single referral that comes our way, that keeps our offices and vehicles from upgrades and updates, that deters us from investing in new technology, real estate and new program development that would help us help the state meet the needs of everyone eligible for services.

We did not qualify for the PPP loans due to our size, and while nonprofit providers were allocated a portion of the Coronavirus Relief Fund, those funds are spent, and the State has not used the increased federal Medicaid match to increase rates or otherwise compensate providers.

With HB 6366 there is no longer a lack of resources if used wisely. With the proposal of \$461 million to nonprofits over the next 5 years, you will not have to worry about Critically Essential Human Service Workers earning general minimum wage, wage compression in the nonprofit sector, benefits for nonprofits, etc. when you ensure, as with other State Contracts, there are Cost of Living increases built in, a CT State shared expense with Medicaid.

The **enhanced FMAP is a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the Connecticut General Assembly to address these needs.** This influx of federal funding combined with the state's strong Rainy Day Fund, and more than \$400 million in unexpended Medicaid funds, puts the state in the unique position to use those funds to directly support nonprofit programs and fulfill their needs without complicating the state budget process.

Congress intended for the American Rescue Plan to help Americans across the country get to the other side of COVID-19, and this bill would provide significant support to help community nonprofits and their staff emerge from COVID-19 stronger and more ready to meet the needs of our communities.

It is not just Connecticut in this predicament, and being offered the resources to increase the extremely stale Medicaid reimbursement rates. Please be the progressive State that we are proud to live in due to quality of life and value all people, use this money for what it is intended for, to increase Medicaid Rates.

We urge the Committee to support H.B. 6636.