



Scott Brabant
Board Chair

Luis B. Pérez, LCSW
President & CEO

**Human Services Committee
in Support of HB 6636, Amending Language
Public Hearing
Thursday, March 25, 2021**

Good Morning, Honorable Chairs Senator Moore and Representative Abercrombie, Senator Berthel, Representative Case and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Luis Perez, LCSW. I am the President and CEO of Mental Health Connecticut (MHC). MHC is a 113-year-old nonprofit which has provided essential community services, across the system of care that impacts more than 1,000 people served daily by our dedicated staff. We create environments that support long-term health and wellness. MHC supports approximately 1,000 people per day through our advocacy, community education, and services that include housing supports; employment supports; educational supports and wrap around services in Stamford, Bridgeport, Danbury, Waterbury, Torrington, and West Hartford.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.B. 6636 An Act Concerning COVID-19 and Enhanced Federal Medicaid Funding. The American Rescue Plan is expected to bring \$10 billion into Connecticut, with over \$4 billion going directly to state and local governments. Connecticut is set to receive a significant increase in federal matching funds for Medicaid, including a 10% increase for Home and Community Based Services as well as the continuation of the 6.2% increase that began in the Spring of 2020. While nonprofit providers were allocated a portion of the Coronavirus Relief Fund, those funds were spent months ago, and the State has not used the increased federal Medicaid match to increase rates or otherwise compensate providers. As you know, Community non-profits provide essential services in every part of Connecticut, serving people in need and employing tens of thousands. This past year has shown the resiliency and dedication of the Non-profit community and all those we employ and provide services to. COVID-19 brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs and operational challenges.

MHC received a portion of the Coronavirus Relief Fund, however, those funds were spent on additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); additional technology to promote remote communications; and additional cleaning measures. Many of our facilities are open 24/7 and our workers are frontline workers in the COVID-19 pandemic. MHC never closed our doors and we have been meeting the needs of the people we support despite the risks. COVID-19 brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs well over a million dollars and operational challenges that have stretched our resources and exhausted our staffing. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on making our environments safer for the people we support many of whom are at a higher risk for contracting COVID. Upgrades and changes included eliminating any areas that promote group gatherings; hunting for PPE equipment to keep our staff safe including making cloth masks and homemade hand sanitizer in the beginning because we could not get supplies; and revamping our schedules to ensure social distancing and investing in disinfecting products and services for all of our programs, homes and vehicles; redesigning program environments to address social distancing and reconfiguring how to conduct engaging activities; keep people safe, but continuing to provide job coaching and the supports for people in need of our support. We have provided incentives to employees to keep people working at MHC by providing hazard pay for essential workers on the front lines with a higher risk of exposure.



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As you may know, community nonprofits have requested that the legislature appropriate \$461 million over the next five years for community nonprofits. Since 2007, community nonprofits have lost at least this much in state funding that has not kept pace with inflation or covered increased costs and demand for services over the last thirteen years. COVID-19 has only exacerbated those challenges. This lack of funding has contributed to the staffing crisis going around our state and nation. It is easier and less stressful for staff to work in a retail environment than to provide hands on support, assisting clients with medication administration, going into their homes to assist with activities of daily living and in some cases dealing with aggressive behaviors. Unfortunately, wages have not kept pace over the last 20 years due to consistent lack of cost-of-living increases and we often lose experienced workers to higher paying jobs even those at big boxes. However, since COVID-19 exacerbated the situation and has caused many staff and management to leave the field, we are left with few choices. Because a substantial portion of the \$461 million restoration for community nonprofits will be to provide increased Medicaid rates, 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 emerge from COVID-19 stronger and more ready to meet the needs of our communities.

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

Respectfully,

Luis B. Pérez, LCSW
President and CEO