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**Testimony for the
Public Health and Children's Committee
Jennifer Widness, President
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On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges (CCIC), I am submitting testimony on **HB 5001: An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health**, which seeks to expand the availability and provision of mental health, behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment services to children.

CCIC strongly supports this bill and recognizes the tremendous impact the pandemic has had on our students, families and health care workers.

We would raise three points for consideration as this bill moves through the legislative process:

1. Giving the significant role that we play in awarding the key degrees required to confront the health issues this legislation seeks to address, Connecticut independent colleges must be part of the proposed workforce and talent solutions crafted as part of this legislation.
2. In particular, Section 19 of HB 5001 authorizes a grant program run by the State Department of Education for school districts and public institutions of higher ed to offer school-based delivery of mental health services. We would ask that this language be expanded to allow for independent colleges to assist with the provisions of these services as well.
3. Mental health challenges do not end when young people graduate from high school. Additional resources and attention are needed to support post-secondary institutions address these same issues for when students matriculate to college.

Talent and School-based delivery of mental health services

The fifteen private, non-profit institutions that comprise the membership of CCIC collectively award nearly 50% of the bachelor's degrees earned in this state every year and over 60% of the graduate degrees earned. They award 46% of the master's degrees in social work and nearly 60% of the bachelor's degrees and above in the health professions. At many of our member institutions, their graduates stay in state for work at a rate that is equal to or higher than that of our public counterparts.

Accordingly, to the extent this legislation seeks to develop programs that create pipelines for more professionals in the areas identified to support the provision of mental health, behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment services to children, the independent colleges want to assist. Many institutions offer accelerated programs and transfer pipelines from the community colleges and generous institutional and federal student aid is available.

Further, institutions of higher education are equipped similar to the public institutions of higher education to partner with local school districts and provide services and therefore should be included in the proposed program in Section 19.

Of note, the state's support for need-based financial aid has waned over the last decade and Connecticut now ranks near the bottom in its investment. A recent national study found that Connecticut invests only \$259 in need-based grant aid per enrolled undergraduate, far less than half of the national average of \$721 per student. To the extent that this state is facing a talent shortage in professions that require advance degrees, re-investing in need-based aid will be critical to addressing that deficit.

Post-Secondary Support

Prior to the pandemic, mental health issues among college students were on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic has subsequently introduced a level of fear, uncertainty, and isolation so significant that its impact has increased the incidence of moderate to severe anxiety and depression among first-year college students by 40% and 48%, respectively. These mental health challenges require higher education institutions to address not just the increased demand for mental health services on campuses but also to provide more support services and accommodations for students so that they are able to persist in their coursework and complete their degrees.

Two important first steps have been taken in the last twelve months in Connecticut to begin to address this issue. First, legislation was adopted in 2021 requiring institutions to establish mental health coalition to assess the presence of mental health services and programs. Second, the Governor allocated \$2.8 million in federal stimulus dollars to institutions to help to begin to address this issue. While significant and an important first step, with a total enrollment in the state of nearly 140,000 students, the funding received equates to approximately \$19.60 per student.

More resources are needed to provide greater mental health and student support services. Many independent colleges in the state -- especially those that serve a larger percentage of Pell-eligible students -- are facing fiscal stress due to pandemic-related losses and expenses and enrollment declines. In some instances, the enrollment declines at the independent colleges from Fall '20 to Fall '21 are steeper than what is being experienced at the CSCU.

Given mounting demand and limited resources, anything the legislature could do to support post-secondary institutions in this work would be appreciated.