Dr. Sandra C. Garrett
Assistant Professor
Department of Genetics and Genome Sciences
Supporting UCH Budget

My name is Sandra Garrett and I have been an assistant professor in the Department of Genetics and Genome Sciences for about one year. I appreciate the opportunity to give my impressions of UConn Health and its importance to the state. I'm a relative new-comer to Connecticut, so hopefully I can offer an outsider's perspective. I grew up in Aiken, South Carolina. I received a bachelor's degree in entomology from the University of Florida in Gainesville and then followed that up with a Master's degree in medical entomology. For personal reasons, I then moved to Puerto Rico, and there I completed my PhD in biology. In 2013, I came to Farmington for my post-doctoral training. I really wanted to learn and apply the tools of "Next Generation Sequencing", which is basically just reading out sequences of DNA but on a massive scale so that you are collecting millions of DNA sequences in parallel with each experiment. Of the places I interviewed, UConn Health seemed like the best one for me to learn these approaches, given the core of resources and expertise here.

When I first came to UConn Health, my intentions were to learn as much as I could and then move on to a new place after a couple years. Postdocs are typically temporary anyway, and I wasn't sure that there were long-term opportunities in this area. Now, seven years later, I don't ever want to leave. I certainly met my original goal of learning and applying the tools of massively parallel DNA sequencing, but in addition I found this to be an incredibly satisfying place to live and work. I have two children, a second grader and a fourth grader, both enrolled in Farmington public schools and they're thriving. This is such a comfortable and livable town that I have been able to give them a stable and enriching upbringing and still have time to devote to my research.

I now believe there are many long-term opportunities here in and around Farmington. That change in my outlook over the last seven years is probably partially because I have gotten to know the area a little better, but I think it may also be that the UConn Health campus has changed and in turn it has influenced the surrounding area. I distinctly remember walking around the campus in the Spring after I first arrived, and I saw construction everywhere. I think they were working on the outpatient building and Jackson laboratories and maybe some expanded parking. I thought to myself that someone was being a bit too ambitious and I'm generally skeptical of the "build it and they will come" mentality. But I have honestly changed my mind. Jackson labs quickly filled up after completion and there's a lot of interaction between their people and ours at UConn. For example, I recently started a collaboration with a lab there; I'm studying a particular set of important genes in bacteria and they study the diverse assemblages of bacteria that live in people (the microbiome) and so together we thought we could come up with new ideas about how the bacteria living within us can influence health.

Another big change since my arrival is that there are now dozens of small companies developing applied biotech products right in the other half of our building at 400 Farmington Ave. It's part of TIP, or Technology Incubation Program, and I wouldn't have given it a second thought a few years ago, but now it feels like an engine of creative energy. Seven years later, UConn Health feels like a growing science hub to me. It seems to have that dynamic, upbeat pulse that I associated with places like Boston/Cambridge, but it's still a comfortable place to live where I can actually afford a house and my kids can play outside and climb trees. Someone less cynical than me must have realized the potential in having Jackson labs and emerging biotech companies right together at UConn Health, and now that it really seems to be taking off, I want to stay here in Farmington and watch it grow. I hope legislators continue to support UConn Health and view it as the foundation or bedrock of this lively new science community.