

Testimony Appropriations Committee February 21, 2020

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am Joe Drexler Executive Director of RMS a non-profit agency that provides supports to 239 people with intellectual disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 5005 An Act Adjusting The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2021,

RMS supports people from the ages of 11 years old to 90 years old. Most of the people we support require 24 hour supports. We serve people in and around Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, Meriden and Danbury.

As Executive Director of RMS, each day I witness the strength and resilience of people with intellectual disabilities as they seek a happy productive life in the community while enjoying their relationships. I am also fortunate to witness the work of hundreds of employees who care deeply about the people they support.

RMS has 525 employees who support people with a wide range of support needs. Our employees support people with challenging behaviors and complex medical issues. These employees receive extensive training and must comply with many state regulations, policies and procedures. They need to be flexible, hard-working, while being caring and positive. As rewarding as the work can be it is not a job for just anyone. The state funding for private non-profits does not support a pay scale commensurate with the work people do. Too many employees are forced to choose between the work they love and higher compensation. Too many employees work two or three jobs so they can support themselves and their families. I have barbers, hair dressers, dental hygienists, wait staff, cooks and lots of retail workers and home health aides trying to hustle their way to a decent life by supplementing their non-profit wages. I, like many of my veteran employees worry about the future of the field we love so much. RMS has some great younger employees, but they see this work as a stepping stone. The pay levels make it hard or impossible for them to think of this work as their career. If the state addresses the obvious funding issues that hold down compensation, it would send a positive message to every employer in Connecticut about the importance of paying a living wage.

Do we really want the staff who do tube feedings, give medications, calm upset people and when necessary restrain them in a safe manner to earn the same wages as the 16 year old who works in retail, or the person who cleans the floor at the local hospital.

Because of the recent support of the legislature at least our staff are no longer paid less than those people. I am grateful for that funding that my employees so truly deserved.

Unfortunately, self-serving abdication has left this legislature with the task of correcting the consistent government neglect of the past three decades. It falls on this legislature to use the money that is in fact available to right this wrong. The current funding system is wrong for the non-profit employees and wrong for the people they support. If you fail to act now you will squander a tremendous opportunity to fix the system before bad services become an accepted norm in Connecticut due to lack of funding.

I ask that you support the plan put forth by non-profit groups and commit to increasing funding by 461 million or 28% by Fiscal Year 2025. Appropriate a minimum of 128 million dollars in new funding for community. If you do it the federal government will pay nearly half of it.

After you bring the funding to a reasonable level over four years index increases to inflation to ensure state funding keeps pace with inflation and maintain human services as a valuable part of the Connecticut communities.

To be candid I think the plan should be more aggressive. If people are making \$15 an hour to handle a package today, I should think the minimum to care for a human being should be at least \$20 today. Then index from there.

Please take action now so the young people RMS supports can have the same level of support that our senior citizens have enjoyed for over 30 years. Next year, next biennium is not good enough.

Thank you for your willingness to listen to my testimony and I would happily answer any questions.