

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on H.B. 5005

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

I appreciate your willingness to give up your Friday evening to hear from us and will do my best to keep my comments brief.

I am David Porteus from Portland, Connecticut and I am testifying today in several capacities. First as a parent of an autistic child who has received services through a number of non-profit groups funded by the State. Secondly as a member of the board directors of two different nonprofit organizations which receive funding primarily from DMHAS and DDS. (I should be clear that my family does not receive services from either of these nonprofits.)

My experience over the last thirty years has been that the non-profit community provides services that are economical, appropriate and well-run. They are, as you know, far less costly than similar services run directly by the State. Yet I have seen over the last decade funding decisions by the State that threaten these institutions and the people who work there. This year we have a chance to address problems caused by past appropriations and I am asking for your support of several items relating to H.B. 5005.

Many providers have received no increase in general funding since 2007. Cost increases had to be absorbed by already “lean” organizations. “Not for profit” groups are now running deficits that have to be covered by reducing services, liquidating assets or –if lucky – through increased donations from the public.

I have been privileged to meet and work with many caring, competent individuals who support the clientele of DMHAS and DDS, clients with profound needs who often rely on these agencies as their only source of hope.

Yet I have also seen some of those caring staff members sadly forced to leave their jobs as a decade of stagnant pay has made it impossible for them to make ends meet, even if working one or more additional jobs. They have not benefited from increases and benefits awarded to state employees and, in some cases, have experienced cuts as agencies struggle to balance budgets and still provide much needed services. Fifteen years ago it was not surprising to have group home staff that had 5, 10, 20 or more years of experience in the same location. I now find tenure often measured in months as agencies struggle to train and keep qualified employees.

We can fix that, and I would ask that you specifically consider the following as you evaluate funding outlined in H.B. 5005:

- Please recognize that Medicaid rates are insufficient to cover the cost of services for many DMHAS clients. It is estimated that community providers are losing roughly \$27 million per year due to this shortfall.
- Please review DMHAS grant funding for behavioral health, which has been cut by 29% over the last six years as deaths from opioid overdoses tripled.
- Please support the Governor’s proposal in the DSS and DDS budgets to create an incentive payment model to help move people with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities into less intensive and more appropriate levels of care.
- Please recognize the burden that the current waiting list for services places on families, often with parents in their 60s and 70s, and redeploy any savings from this incentive payment model – or elsewhere – to fund those needs.
- Please do not cut the Behavioral Support Program in the DDS budget.
- Please consider an appropriation of \$128 million (\$67 net of federal reimbursement) for FY 2021 in additional funding for community nonprofits.
- Please take a long term perspective and recognize that ten years of stagnation cannot be reversed without a plan that continues through the next budget cycles and includes a long term, indexed approach to funding.

This is clearly a financial decision for this committee but it is also much more than that. In some ways, I am holding my hand up to ask for help in place of many others who are unable to do that themselves. As my wife asked rhetorically earlier this week when we talked about these issues:

“If a community chooses not to take care of its most vulnerable individuals, what does that say about the community?”

We have a choice about what kind of community we want to be and I hope that you will also raise your hand to support this bill.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.