



Good Afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Rob Baril and I am president of the Service Employees International Union, District 1199 New England. Our union represents about 26,000 health care workers in Connecticut, including approximately 3,000 workers that deliver mental health care across the public and private sectors in Connecticut. 1199 members help Connecticut residents cope with histories of trauma, abuse, and addiction and attempt to best give them the tools they need to recover. They do it with love and care to achieve healthy outcomes.

First, I want to start by thanking the Committee for protecting the continuum of care in Connecticut's budget last year. Programs like Young Adult Services, and transitional bed units in Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport are vital services to many communities across Connecticut. 1199 members that work in those programs have formed deep bonds with the clients they serve. Bonds that help with recovery. And protecting that funding was a critical step in the right direction to preserve the care that these communities deserve. But in order to address the problems in mental health care in Connecticut, we have to do a lot more.

I constantly hear from our members that they are doing more with less. They have less resources every year, they are utterly short staffed, and they are demoralized. They are mandated to stay at work over and over again, required to triage crises rather than act proactively, and frequently work below the already unsafe minimum staffing levels. When you take a look at the problem nationally, we recognize that we are experiencing a staffing crisis in healthcare.

In the last 5 years, Connecticut's budget for DMHAS has been cut by 25%. 1199 union members have told us that every year they see another program disappear: housing, food programs, health services, and many more. Nationally, we have seen yearly Medicaid funding reductions, leaving thousands of people in need of mental health services without coverage for quality care. Several weeks ago, I met with a member of ours in Bridgeport, a doctor, who told me he wakes up every day and wonders if he is going to open up the paper and see one of his clients as the next Newtown shooter. Connecticut needs to do better. Connecticut can do better. Connecticut must do better.

The staffing crisis is compounded by the fact that we are not in a position to hire and retain workers. Within DMHAS, equivalent workers in the private practice sector make more money for similar work, and the state pension isn't good enough to attract workers. In addition, we are underfunding the private sector. With the increase in minimum wage, the nonprofit sector is also reaching crisis levels and it's having a hard time filling staff

openings. It means that well educated workers in the private nonprofit sector, some of them holding multiple degrees, have salaries as low as fast-food workers with no benefits. Within the agency, racial discrimination and the absence of equitable job ladders makes retaining the current workforce nearly impossible. I'm here to tell you that the members of 1199 are talented workers who are extremely proud of the work they do. They want to see that their communities are properly served and they know what they are doing.

As our members will describe tonight, providing quality care means making a meaningful, sustained investment in mental health care. We need to invest in physical and mental health services throughout our communities. We need to construct a robust system of health services available to all individuals --white, black and brown-- in all of Connecticut's communities.

I'm asking you today, are we going to show progress by making a *real investment* in mental health services? Are we going to expand preventative care for Connecticut's most vulnerable residents, create a safer environment for staff, and develop healthier communities for all of us? Or will we continue to allow the mental health crisis in Connecticut to grow out of reach and cut our losses when tragedy strikes again?

1199 union health care workers aim to prevent, rather than react, to emergencies. It's time for Connecticut to take action *now* and follow through on our progressive vision for quality mental health care.