

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2020
DMHAS BUDGET HEARING
H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE
BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021
Dyana Hagen, BSW, Manager of Common Ground

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee

My name is Dyana Hagen, and I am an active independent registered voter in Tolland. First, I want to thank you for your time. I would also like to thank the governor for ensuring that funding for services were not cut in this year's budget as it has been in many preceding years.

However, I am concerned that it has flatlined when the need is great, and CT saw an increase of Opioid related overdoses resulting in 1200 deaths last year, (NPR source). I work for InterCommunity Healthcare for the Whole person, a non-profit that specializes in treatment and recovery for individuals who suffer from mental illness, addiction, or both. We also provide school-based health and behavioral health in East Hartford. We specialize in the gold standards of medication assisted treatment for addiction, primary care, behavioral health and rehabilitation for marginalized and vulnerable populations of our communities.

I am the manager for the rehabilitation club, Common Ground. Social clubs like ours with the help of case managers at our company, are on the front lines fighting the illnesses that would debilitate the strongest members of our community. Sometimes, we literally put people back together, empower them, heal them so that they can have healthy relationships, employment, cognitive remediation, transitional housing, and other basic needs. If there is a problem in our community, InterCommunity finds a way or starts a program to help. Yet our funding has either been cut or flatlined for many years.

I am testifying today to let you know about many successes I have witnessed in advancing and enriching the lives of our patients and members so that they can get the care they need and deserve, stabilize their lives and become productive members of the community with employment, housing, and functional familial relationships. We did our first open house in January with a great turnout of family members and stakeholders who are interested in ensuring their loved ones get the care they need while family members receive the coping and occupational skills and support they need. Social Clubs close the gap between stabilizing lives and returning to toxic environments that led to addiction, homelessness, neglect and death. This healthcare crisis is non-discriminate. Mental illness and addiction effects 1 in 4 households regardless of socioeconomic factors. Our services are cost saving to the state, and life saving for families. What is really amazing is how the relationships and socialization extend outward into the community as I see how they all look out for each other inside and outside of the club. These are healthy relationships we are helping to build that extend way beyond the open hours of the clubhouse. In comparison to other services, our clubhouse costs a small fraction with many consumers being served. Still we are experiencing a bulging population in a small with our outreach efforts in the community, and our budget is stretched thin as is the size of our club. Social clubs offer a safe, engaging learning space to go to in between doctor's appointments and are the most cost-effective way for communities to get help for their residents because they have a counselor to listen whenever they are having a bad day to keep them on track with coping skills to lead a healthy life.

Second, I am concerned about ensuring that enough DMHAS funding is appropriated so that we, and other non-profits can continue to provide these life enriching and life saving services for our communities.

The State of CT has generally given raises of 3% for the past ten years to State employees. That equates to approximately 30% more in wages. Yet, non-profits have had their funding cut, causing layoffs, and program

cuts. Many haven't seen raises in over 10 years! Human service workers have the heart to take on some very difficult situations and make them better for vulnerable citizens. They build trusting relationships with their clients, which is a first step in help and hope for suffering citizens. With this working environment, non-profits tend to be the training ground for State employees to get better paying jobs. Still, you can't blame them. Social Workers qualifications require advanced education and with that comes student debt. With the imminent increases in minimum wage, many social workers will leave their positions for easier wages and benefits if we cannot afford to increase their wages in the trusted positions they have now. With the rainy-day fund being so high, its time to consider the struggling human service workers who need assistance to feed their own families and heat their own homes. They deserve to be able to pay their student loans and their rent. I ask that you increase DMHAS funding, and support the reallocation of funding to non-profits, so that they do not have to compete for employees. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dyana Hagen, BSW

Manager of Common Ground.