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SEIU 1199NE
Before the Judiciary Committee

In Support of SB 987: AN ACT CONCERNING REINVESTMENT OF SAVINGS ACHIEVED THROUGH A REDUCTION IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITY POPULATION INTO REENTRY AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Good afternoon Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom and members of the Committee, my name is Sonja Morton. I'm a licensed clinical social worker in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. I work in mobile crisis as a trained clinician at the Capitol Region Mental Health Center in Hartford, where we help people who are experiencing mental health emergencies. Mobile crisis services are a collaborative intervention providing the most effective strategy for responding to mental health emergencies, preventing suicides and overdose deaths, and reducing ER visits. In Hartford and across Connecticut, we disproportionately serve people of color. We are the workers who provide the safety net for the most disadvantaged people with severe and prolonged mental illness, often complicated by substance abuse. Our services are so important because they can be the difference between life and death for many of our clients. **I am here today in support of Senate Bill 987.**

Over many years and especially the last ten, however, chronic underfunding has cut our services to the bone – leaving huge gaps in coverage on nights and weekends. As a result, mental health emergencies are often handled by the police—not trained mental health professionals like us.

We need to expand mobile crisis services now more than ever. The pandemic and the huge mental health crisis that it has created have exposed the cracks in our safety net—cracks that our members and our clients have known about for a long time. At Capitol Region, the number of calls we receive from the police has tripled since the start of the pandemic.

One Saturday while my coworker was on duty, she responded to a 211 call from a woman experiencing an emergency—the woman had overdosed. My coworker knew the woman and her specific needs, so she was able to react quickly. If the woman had called later on during the night, and got the answering machine, she would have died. It was only because my experienced coworker was on shift to take the call that a precious life was saved and not lost.

This year we MUST expand Mobile Crisis Services. It's the difference between life and death. We have the resources to fund universal, comprehensive, mobile crisis services statewide. And as 1199 members, we are demanding this as a matter of justice – for the people that have been left behind in our society. It's not a coincidence that these cuts have been made to a service that primarily assists working-class communities and communities of color in particular. This problem is systemic and you have the ability to change that. Support Senate Bill 987 and expand mobile crisis and community response teams across the state.