

Re: S.B. 1 AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Good Day Senator, Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Anwar, Senator Kushner, Representative Gilchrest, Senator Hwang, Senator Somers, and Honorable Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am delighted for this opportunity to present written testimony on **SB1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the COVID 19 Pandemic.**

My name is Tamara Bojarski, LCSW. I am writing to you as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker at the Windham Middle School Based Health Center. I have been a social worker at the School Based Health Center (SBHC) for four years. This past year by far has been the most challenging for our students. I have seen first-hand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our student's mental health and emotional well-being. All of the sudden, our student's lives changed overnight. Things such as socialization, access to support staff, school-related activities and having a "normal routine" were gone. The pandemic and lockdown have already had a long-lasting impact on our children's emotional and social development. Many of my students have had to deal with home confinement for many, many months void of social interactions, trips to the park and simple outings at McDonalds. The "safe haven" they once had in school was abruptly taken from them. As such, the uncertainty and anxiety that has been experienced has had a major impact on their mental health. The SBHC's have become a critical health care delivery option for our children who have limited access to medical and mental health services. As a member of the SBHC, we know how critical it was to stay connected to students whose health risks and history are known. When the pandemic hit, we had to quickly shift and adapt our services to continue to meet the needs of our student population. This meant we had to shift from "in-person to on-line." None of us were prepared for this shift, but we swiftly came to the challenge learning a whole new world of things such as Google Classroom, Google Meets and Zoom Meetings. Our students clearly needed us and we couldn't let them down.

I think it's important to illustrate a "real life" example of how one of my students utilized the services of the SBHC during the lockdown. One of my counseling students "Jamie" was previously an A student and a star athlete. When the pandemic hit, her teacher reached out to me to let me know she was concerned

about Jamie and noticed she was experiencing increased anxiety, as she stopped attending her on-line classes. I reached out to Jamie on-line and we were able to have a counseling session virtually. Jamie began to tell me that her anxiety had hit “all-time highs” and she was having anxiety attacks every day. She was feeling hopeless and didn’t feel comfortable talking to her parents, as she thought it would “add to their stress.” Jamie’s parents had no idea how bad her anxiety had gotten. Her grades starting slipping as she could not concentrate. After exploring with Jamie what was triggering her anxiety, she had indicated that she was “scared to death” that her mom and dad were going to contract COVID 19 and die. You see, Jamie’s parents still had to work outside the home during the pandemic. Jamie spent her days worrying that her parents would die; even convinced herself that they would inevitably catch COVID 19. Jamie was spending most of her time on social media and watching the news, feeding her anxiety about COVID 19. After just a few on-line sessions, Jamie’s anxiety was able to turn around. I helped her challenge her irrational thoughts and develop mindfulness coping skills. I was also able to educate her on accurate information about COVID 19, which was contrary to what she was seeing on-line. We developed a plan that greatly limited her time on social media and the news. Instead she was able to fill her time with more positive things such as journaling her feelings and practicing progressive muscle relaxation. After these changes and with talk therapy, Jamie no longer felt like her parents were going to die. Her anxiety attacks became less and less. At our last session Jamie said, “Thank you so much for helping me. I didn’t know where to turn when I was feeling at my worst. I just needed someone to listen to me and help me get through this. I’m so thankful for the health center. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” Jamie is just one of many examples of students who benefit from the services offered by the SBHC. Students like Jamie would have no one to turn to during the COVID 19 crisis to address their mental health needs.

The School Based Health Center is a critical part of Windham Community. Covid 19 has brought a complex array of factors that have an impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. Now is the time for the expansion of Student Based Health Centers and the plethora of resources they offer. It is known that the long-term impacts on mental health related to the pandemic are still yet to be seen. Early, quick intervention may prevent long-term mental health consequences.

Sincerely,

Tamara Bojarski, LCSW

School-Based Health Center Social Worker

Windham Middle School