



March 15, 2021

Testimony of the Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers in Support of
SB1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic

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

My name is Laurie Collins, and I am the Association Director for the Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers. ***I am testifying in support of SB1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic***

School Based Health Centers (SBHC) in 27 communities across the state serve as the main point of contact for nearly 40,000 children to obtain medical, mental health and dental care. SBHCs provide a range of services, including medical care for acute and chronic illness, well-child visits, immunizations, individual, group and family therapy for mental and behavioral health conditions and in some sites, oral hygiene, and dental care. School Based Health Centers were designed to remove the barriers associated with children's access to quality medical, dental, and mental health care, which include things like limited or no health insurance and geographical barriers like provider shortages and a lack of reliable transportation. SBHCs provide medical, dental, and mental health services on site at schools to all enrolled children, regardless of their ability to pay. For so many young people, SBHCs have become a lifeline for them to access services quickly, and easily.

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold twelve months ago, critical social distancing measures required schools to transition to remote and hybrid learning models, restricting children's access to the physical school environment. SBHCs quickly pivoted to redesign service models that allowed for the safe delivery of medical and mental health services to Connecticut's children. These changes included the development of

drive-through clinics for immunization services and the implementation of telehealth services to reach children remotely.

While SBHCs found much success with new and innovative strategies to reach students who are currently enrolled in services, we painfully consider those children living in communities in Connecticut where SBHCs are not available. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on all our mental health, but none more than our youth. Children have spent a year dealing with change, upheaval, sickness and death of family members, and social isolation. All these conditions chipping away at their stability, mental health, and resiliency. Yet we know that many areas of CT, like the northwest and northeast corners of the state, are considered provider shortage areas and do not have the resources available to support children through the challenges ahead. We know, both from the emerging literature, and from observation, that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health will be long lasting, and the need for mental health services will only increase in the months to come.

CASBHC strongly supports a comprehensive model of integrated mental health and medical care for children. SBHCs that are available on-site at schools and provide integrated medical and behavioral services are better positioned identify emerging mental health needs in students. For many children, the early signs of mental illness present as changes in their physical health. Early identification is key to successful treatment, and SBHCs that have an integrated medical / behavioral model of service can initiate immediate consultation and referral between services, providing a wraparound service to children who need it.

The Ct Association of School Based Health Centers (CASBHC) **is strongly in support of the expansion of medical and mental health services for children, through the expansion of SBHCs** across the state, particularly in areas of the state with extremely limited resources. It is well documented in the literature that children and families living rurally have increased and unique barriers to accessing quality mental health services, and the expansion of SBHCs to these areas of the state would mitigate many of these barriers. That said, **Ct Association of School Based Health Centers (CASBHC) is also strongly in support of a study to identify areas of the state that are lacking mental health services for children.**

The CT Association of School Based Health Centers strongly believes that healthy kids make healthy learners. Providing medical, mental health and dental services on site at schools contributes greatly to physical and mental health of the students, and the community. For this reason, we **strongly support SB1 that seeks to increase the amount of medical and mental health services available to children through the expansion of school-based health centers and recommend that an integrated medical / mental health model be considered.**

Please contact me if I can be of any assistance. I may be reached by email at lauriecollins@ctschoolealth.org or by phone at 203-230-9976. Thank you for your time and commitment to Connecticut's children.

