

## Public Testimony

### 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 Gilcrest, Senator Hwang, Senator Somers, and Honorable Members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Anna Faria, I am writing to you as the APRN at the School-Based Health Center at Pulaski Middle School in New Britain, operated by Community Health Center Inc. I have worked in school-based services for over 10 years, in communities all over the State of Connecticut, including Hamden, New Britain, and Bridgeport.

I appreciate the opportunity to present written testimony on *SB1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic*.

As a Pediatric APRN who has worked in both primary care and school-based settings, I understand the importance of continuity of comprehensive health care to the well-being of our children. All too often, we see the ways in which children who are unable to access medical, mental health, or dental services, suffer physically, emotionally, and in their education. The medical home is crucial to ensuring that these needs of our children are met, but for many of our most at-risk families, the medical home can be difficult to access. School-based health services provide an essential extension of the medical home and an access-point for families—in their communities and at the heart of their children’s daily activities—their schools. School-based health centers allow children and families access to basic medical services, such as physicals and sick visits, which otherwise would force them to stay home from school, while families struggle to find time off from work, transportation, available appointments, and financial resources to utilize other health care resources. The same is true for dental services and mental health services.

When I think about the importance of school-based health centers, I look back on 10 years of practice, and see the many faces of the families I have worked with. Children with chronic health conditions; families struggling to meet medical and mental health needs while also maintaining employment; undocumented families without health insurance and with fears about accessing more traditional health centers; children with mental health issues manifesting as somatic complaints; new immigrant families in need of immunizations, medical clearance for school, and assistance with navigating the often-complex medical and insurance system; teens with a myriad of questions about reproductive health, substances, and peer pressures. Of course, there are some patients and families who stand out, in particular.

One patient that comes to mind is a high school student who learned that she was pregnant while at a visit to the SBHC. After counseling this patient about her options, we were able to help her share this news with her family, and help facilitate access to prenatal care. Despite a somewhat challenging pregnancy, the student was able to finish out her school year, with the support of the SBHC medical services in collaboration with her OB, along with behavioral health services. She gave birth to a healthy baby girl, and returned to school soon after. She continued to utilize school-based services, where she sought advice about breastfeeding, and infant care, as well as on-going support from our school-based therapist. Not only did the school-based health center provider her with much-needed medical and

emotional support during pregnancy, we were also able to help provide these supports to her as a new mother, a resource that undoubtedly helped maintain her ability to stay in school, and to successfully transition into the new and challenging role of parenthood.

Another, more recent example is a middle school boy and his single father who first came to the health center for a school-entry physical a little over a year ago. Without health insurance, or transportation, they turned to our SBHC for this crucial step towards enrolling in school. They were both exceedingly wary of medical providers, but this father was also determined to get his son, a severe asthmatic with learning and behavioral issues, the support he needed. Because of our location in the school and the school-based health center, we were able to link this family up with mental health services, participate in dialogue with the school about the services this child needed, help the father apply for medical insurance, and later establish a primary care provider. When this student's asthma flared up in school, he was able to come to the school-based health center, and therefore never missed school as a result. Some days, his father would even drop him off to school in our health center, believing confidently that we would ensure he was healthy enough to complete the day at school. When the State shut down due to COVID19, and his son's allergy symptoms started to flare up, his father continued to request weekly phone calls, and occasionally telehealth visits, to check-in. When mental health and school performance issues began to overshadow any medical concerns, this child's mental health provider was, despite COVID19, just a phone call and telehealth visit away, and able to provide continued and much needed services via telehealth. This past Fall, I had the pleasure of seeing this student back at the health center for another annual physical, as he prepared to enter high school. He and his father rode their bicycles to the health center and, as we sat outside together, he shared stories about his Summer, fears about the new school year, and then confidently demonstrated his mastery of his asthma medications and Epi-Pen, skills we had practiced via telehealth. In many ways, it was a moment that, to me, exemplifies the type of care that can only take place in a school-based health center, but which is often also the best way to reach some of our most vulnerable students and patients.

While COVID19 has led to many children not physically being in our schools, school-based health services are more important now than ever. Families are struggling more now than ever to access affordable services in safe and familiar locations, and school-based health centers continue to provide this access point. As we begin to reopen our schools, these centers will likely be one of the first locations where our most vulnerable children can, and will, present with medical, dental and behavioral health concerns, many of which have gone largely overlooked during the past year. Families will also likely look to the school-based health centers to provide advice about making crucial decisions surrounding vaccination, return to in-person learning, and how best to navigate decisions about social distancing and infection control measures. Not only do school-based health centers allow families the convenience of easy access, reduce exposures, and allow for comprehensive services to be provided in a community setting while minimizing school and work absences, they will also be a crucial partner in continuing to educate our most vulnerable populations about the importance of vaccination and other COVID prevention measures.