

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 Kristin Sikes MSN APRN CPNP. I am writing you as the nurse practitioner in a School Based Health Clinic (SBHC) at Bunnell High School in Stratford, Connecticut. 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*.

My school-based site is a relatively new one, we had just started to build a relationship with our students when the pandemic hit, a little over one year ago today. The spring of 2020 was challenging for everyone. We initially struggled to stay in contact with our students and to provide mental and physical care in this new environment. One of the tenets of school-based health is that the clinic should meet students “where they are” and last spring, that meant we needed to meet them remotely. Our school based health team transitioned quickly to providing tele-healthcare opportunities for all school-based students.

As it became apparent over last summer that students would be returning to in-school learning, at least on a hybrid basis, our SBHC team felt it was imperative that we be in school as well. We re-arranged our physical space to meet safety guidelines, and we pivoted our model to be able to provide both in-person and telehealth visits. It was essential that our students know that despite all the changes and upheaval in their lives, their school based health clinic was still available to help meet their healthcare needs.

Our mental health services have been essential for many students in helping them to cope with the stressors and challenges of attending high school during a pandemic. We have seen dozens of new enrollments for our behavioral health services. Parents have remarked that they are grateful for these services because we can engage with students during the school day to provide these services. Many parents are struggling to keep their jobs and they say that without the flexibility of the SBHC to see students in a school setting, they would not be able to provide their children with the mental health services they need.

School based health services provide consistent and compassionate physical and mental health services to all students, regardless of income or insurance status. This pandemic has exposed how vulnerable populations without access to healthcare are at high risk for poor health outcomes. Being able to provide healthcare for students in their schools eliminates the challenges of transportation, scheduling and paying for health services in the community. In our high school, our focus is on, not only providing these services, but in teaching students both about their own health/well-being, and about how to use health services to their own benefit.

I have witnessed first-hand, the positive impact that access to school based healthcare can have on the lives of students and their families. I strongly encourage this committee to pass *SB1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic*. Every student in school in Connecticut should have access to the care provided in a School Base Health Clinic. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

Kristin A. Sikes MSN APRN CPNP