

S.B. No. 1: AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL
HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC.

Good afternoon, Co-chairs Senator Abrams and Representative Steinber and Honorable Members of the Public Health Committee. Thank you for hearing my testimony in support of S.B. 1 AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC. My name is Sarah Surprenant Lappostato and I am a Program Manager for school-based health services at Community Health Center, Inc. I am also a resident of Plainville, CT.

Community Health Center Inc. provides students with medical, behavioral health, and dental services at schools in 180 community and school locations, and specifically provided care to over 18,000 children during the last school year. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the state of CT in March 2020, we made it a priority to continue our mission of serving students, wherever they are. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued to address the increasing need of student behavioral health services whether students are in the building or at home.

In preparing this testimony, I asked our clinicians for feedback on how our services have helped their students during the pandemic. The response was overwhelmingly positive. One East Haven clinician replied, "Parents were working and kids were home, alone, unable to make and maintain friendships. I held groups during this time and watched many of my kids participate in these sessions more so than pre-pandemic. They were laughing, smiling, HAD THEIR SCREENS ON, and acting like kids for the first time since the world stopped in March. Their parents were so grateful for my support as they had no way to have their child socialize under the circumstances. I saw extreme isolation from many of these clients and therapy was their one time weekly where they lit up and had something to look forward to."

A North Haven clinician told me the story of a middle schooler with severe anxiety who has benefitted greatly from SBHC behavioral health services. “His anxiety previously made it difficult for him to attend school regularly. He has been doing well with online school but is ... worried that he won’t be able to transfer into high school in person after being out of school so long. We have been working together since October 2020 through Telehealth on managing anxiety and he now is requesting on his own to return to school in person. He advocated for himself and is going to begin meeting with me in person to manage the anxiety about coming back. The work that we were able to do through Telehealth was definitely helpful in getting him to the place that he was open to returning to school in person.”

I am concerned about the kids who don’t have access to behavioral health services in school. If our services were not in place, where would students go for help? We asked students this very question in a recent survey – “If the SBHC was not here, what would you have done about your health issue?” Twenty one percent of students surveyed answered “Nothing.” Let’s look at these numbers – CHC SBHCs served 18,000 students last year alone. If these students did not have access to SBHCs, that would mean 3,780 students without care. With everything our children have been through this year, we can’t leave them hanging. As we push towards our new definition of “normal,” whatever that may be, let’s empower the children of CT with the tools they desperately need to make this transition successful, by supporting the expansion of SBHC services to all who need them.