

Waterbury HEALTH

**TESTIMONY OF
WATERBURY HOSPITAL
SUBMITTED TO THE
PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE
Wednesday March 17, 2021**

SB 1, An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health in Response to the Pandemic

Testimony of Waterbury Hospital
before the Public Health Committee
on

Senate Bill 1 An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health in Response to the Pandemic

Waterbury HEALTH is pleased to submit this testimony on Senate Bill 1, An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic.

Waterbury HEALTH supports this SB 1 bill; however, this bill contains a number of provisions that could do just the opposite for mental, behavioral and physical health care in Connecticut. While we commend the Committee, and the State, for focusing on mental and behavioral health during the pandemic and there are parts of this bill we can support, we have great concerns with a number of provisions contained in this bill.

Waterbury Hospital is a 347 bed Waterbury Hospital, a sophisticated Level 2 trauma and Level 3 NICU community teaching hospital and is part of the Waterbury HEALTH network.

Waterbury HEALTH has invested in renovations and improvements to Waterbury Hospital departments, including behavioral health and continues to do so. Throughout the pandemic work has taken place on a \$30 million renovation project to the Emergency Department that will include a new and expanded Behavioral Health Emergency Department, scheduled to open in a few months. This major investment will improve services to our community and patients including adolescents.

Our 30-bed in-patient behavioral health unit serves a diverse group of patients. Waterbury Hospital is committed to being responsive to our community and its culturally diverse populations, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We not only provide services that readily accessible to our community, but also education and outreach. For more than 30 years, including throughout the pandemic, Waterbury Hospital had provided outreach to the homeless community in Waterbury.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we converted in-person visits to Telehealth visits to ensure no disruption in Behavioral Health care, when it is needed most. Emergency behavioral health services, including Crisis services, are available at Waterbury Hospital Emergency Department. We have continued to offer open access admissions to patients in the addiction services program to help this group of patients who have been greatly challenged by the pandemic. Now, more than ever, we are committed to address this important element of overall health and the growing demand for mental health services.

All of Connecticut hospitals are committed to providing the highest quality care to achieve optimal patient outcomes. They are intensely engaged in building and sustaining organizational cultures of safety and employing high reliability strategies and evidence-based practices to prevent patient care complications and ensure the best patient experience. The State could do more for the behavioral health system, and providers, by increasing rates to effectuate additional capacity and continued investments in facilities. These programs are incredibly important to the community and are very expensive to run.

Some of the key aspects of this bill that will significantly harm hospitals in this state include the staffing ratios provisions in Section 8. Hospitals, and the health care professionals inside the Hospitals, including our Chief Nursing Officers, should be making the clinical decisions not the state, through the Department of Public Health. Nursing professionals at Connecticut hospitals continuously assess patient care needs and consider a wide range of factors, such as patient acuity levels, that go beyond numbers and ratios to make staffing decisions. Our nursing officers know the capabilities and expertise that each of our nurses possess and plan accordingly. These elements are not captured by simply counting the total number of patients and the total number of staff at any level.

Section 18 contains another version of the Community Benefits Program bill that was heard, and voted on, by the Committee. We are aware of the ongoing discussions between the Hospitals and the Office of Health Strategy; however, the state should not be dictating a minimum community benefit plan and minimum spending thresholds for hospitals. Hospitals already perform these functions and do exhaustive analysis of community needs in the best interest of

people in our service area and to create programs and services that are responsive to the care needs. The state, in many ways, limits hospitals, and community needs, through certificate of need processes and provider rate requests that are often times denied. Waterbury HEALTH, as many hospitals and health networks in our state, seek to provide additional access to care and expand services to serve identified needs.

Waterbury HEALTH applauds the committee for its focus in this bill on mental, behavioral and physical health care in SB 1. We believe, that a particular focus on the policy changes and amendments to the statutes to improve the state's response to future pandemics as highlighted in Sections 4 and 5 of the bill are extremely important. The state should partake an equal focus on improving Behavioral Health and work with hospitals and providers to improve outcomes - not focus on additional regulatory and staffing mandates that are counter to health care outcomes.

Thank you for your attention.

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