

**TESTIMONY OF KAREN SENICH
BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
H.B. No. 6439 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

February 26, 2021

My name is Karen Senich and I am the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury. The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury (“Club”) has been providing safe, after school programs for Greater Waterbury’s children and teens for over 130 years. In 2019 - 2020, the Club served over 200 of Waterbury’s young people. On behalf of the Club, our members and their families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my support to H.B. No. 6439 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury currently receives support through the Judicial Branch Youth Services Prevention Grant (YSP) (PA 12-247) and Youth Violence Initiative Program (YVPI) (PA 18-81). Both have allowed the Club to expand the programs offered to our members, including our middle and high school members, and expand to expand the Club’s capacity to serve more children. The Club’s after-school programs increase the opportunities for children and youth to succeed. The after-school programs focus on children’s cognitive, physical and social/emotional competencies by using the following strategies: (B) youth are encourages to excel and continue in their education; (C) intentional relationship building between adults and children; and (F) children are encouraged to be physically active. Our enrichment programs address the disparity in outcomes for youth living in poverty and overcome the impact socioeconomic status has on a child’s eventual life trajectory.

The Youth Services Prevention and Youth Violence Initiative Program funds were allocated to the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury due to the Club’s proven impact preventing many of the problems facing Waterbury’s youth, including crime, gang membership, violence, drug abuse and delinquency. The Club provides a healthy and safe environment for our youth and reduces violence among youth. The Club’s programs provide youth the opportunity to learn and develop new skills and interests, including sports, technology and art, during a critical part of the day. The Club also provides academic and enrichment programs, including tutoring and mentoring; and other preventative and intervention services for youth and their families. Providing the exposure and opportunities to members opens the youth to new possibilities in their lives finding positive ways to spend their time and allowing them to explore positive futures – school and career. Keeping students occupied in the after-school hours is proven to reduce at-risk behaviors including violence, substance use and sexual activity.

This school year, middle and high school members are participating in programs to help them resist gang involvement and violence and use conflict management strategies. The programs combat bullying and gang involvement both of which causes behavioral, emotional and academic problems. Through programs and speakers, members are engaged to take action

towards equity and the eradication of discrimination and hate. Members participate in programs that promote and teach responsibility by teaching boys and girls to navigate the difficult passage into adulthood. These programs address critical issues face including ethics, decision-making, wellness, employment and more. Beginning in July 2020, all members participated in programs that addressed their social-emotional wellness, addressing issues facing youth due to the pandemic and social justice issues. Nighttime basketball and open gym nights are open to members and non-members in grades 7 – 12. It serves as another to keep young engaged and out of trouble. The program's goals include personal values and skills, including communication, cooperation, responsibility, empathy, engagement and self-control; interpersonal skills, including interpersonal competencies, cultural competence and peaceful conflict resolution; and positive sense of self, including self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future, planning and decision making.

The Youth Services Prevention Grant and the Youth Violence Prevention Grant helps the Club serve its members: boys and girls in grades K – 12. The Club accepts all children and youth/teens regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, financial status or other factor. Our membership generally reflects the demographics of Waterbury. Our current after-school membership (K- 12) demographics are as follows: 100% of our members reside in Waterbury. 7% are in DCF care. 47% of members are of Latino/Hispanic descent; 47% are white (Latino/Hispanic and non-Latino/Hispanic); 41% Black/African-American (Latino/Hispanic and non-Latino/Hispanic); 7% are other multi-racial (Latino/Hispanic and non-Latino/Hispanic); and 2% are Black/African-American & white and American Indian/Alaskan Native & Black/African-American respectively. 50% of our members live in single-parent households; 36% are extremely low income, 40% are very low income and 14% are low income. 58% of our members are male and 42% female. The funding provided by the State also allows the Club to maintain the cost of the annual membership at one hundred fifteen (\$150.00) dollars per school year, making the Club accessible to all.

2020 was interrupted by the Covid pandemic and, fortunately, the Club stayed true to the Mission. The Club closed on March 13, 2020 along with the Waterbury Public Schools but remained a resource for educational, financial and mental health information for the Club's youth and families. Committed to serving those who needed the Club more than ever, the Club opened the Summer Enrichment Program on July 6, 2020. The After-School Program started along with the Public Schools on September 8, 2020. During the hybrid schedule, after-school members completed the virtual portion of their school day at the Club and then participated in the Club's programs. When the Public Schools went all virtual in November, the Club remained open, offering in-person and virtual programs. The programs have lower enrollment (due to mandated group size limits and other Covid-related factors), the Club continued its important work to reverse learning loss, restore feelings of safety and allow the children and youth to have fun again. Along with educational and recreational programs, the Club has focused on the social-emotional health of our members with a life skills curriculum. The impact of COVID on the lives of youth has been tremendous. Their education and social-emotional well-being, along with, possibly, their family and financial status, has been negatively impacted by the shutdown of schools and every public space. They likely suffer from loneliness, anxiety, fear, hunger and other challenging issues. During these especially tough times, members' emotional wellness is as important as their physical wellness. The Club has been a big part of its members' healing and rebound.

The lack of affordable, educationally beneficial after-school opportunities for many youth, especially those in low-income urban communities, is a decisive factor in explaining the nation's widening achievement gap. Research indicates that after-school programs not only keep children safe and out of trouble but also significantly improve academic achievement. Youth attending formal after-school programs spend more time in academic activities and enrichment opportunities than do their peers left unsupervised after school. Young people who spend 25-35 hours per week engaged in constructive learning activities during their out-of-school time show better achievement in reading, mathematics and other subjects than their peers. Participation in the Club's educational programs result in academic proficiency at each grade level and graduation from high school, the ability to make informed decisions about post-secondary education and the development of a lifelong learner. The programs reinforce and enhance the skills and knowledge learned at school. Students do much better in school when they spend their non-school hours engaged in fun, but academically beneficial, activities. School-age youth need additional academic support during after-school hours.

The Youth Services Prevention and Youth Violence Prevention Grants serve to ensure that our members have a safe, positive environment; have fun; supportive relationships; opportunities and expectations; and recognition. All of these programs combine to ensure that our members are provided a positive, impactful experience that, ultimately, leads to positive youth development. The positive outcomes generated by the Club justify the State's support. Additionally, the State's support provides critical leverage for non-governmental support. It is in the best interest of the young people and the greater Waterbury community that the Boys & Girls Club continues to provide a safe after-school environment. I strongly urge you to continue to fund the Youth Services Prevention Grant and Youth Services Prevention Program at current levels.