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An affiliated
chapter of



**Public Hearing on:
H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023
Health Subcommittee
Tuesday, March 2, 10:00 a.m.**

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Katie Banzhaf, Executive Director of STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way. STAR supports over 500 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families throughout mid Fairfield County and employs over 220 staff. Our services begin with early intervention. We offer family supports and assist adults with transition from school to work, employment, volunteering, and adult learning. We provide housing, and senior supports. Our comprehensive services also include case management, counseling, nursing, and transportation and interpretation services.

I am here today to testify on H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June, 2023.

As you know agencies like STAR, funded through the Department of Developmental Services, have not received a COLA since 2007. While we are very grateful for the wage adjustment provided two years ago bringing the direct support professional wages to \$14.75 hr., there has been no increase since then and nothing to keep pace with inflation.

Prior to the pandemic, STAR struggled to recruit and retain qualified direct support staff in Fairfield County with a \$14.75 hourly wage.

Then in March came Covid-19. During the pandemic STAR along with other service agencies has worked diligently and successfully to keep the people we support and their staff safe. We never closed our doors to our residences. In fact, when faced with an exposure, our amazing staff stepped up and provided safe and compassionate care – often joining the quarantine at the group home as a means to reduce exposure to other staff, residents and to their own families. We have certainly witnessed heroes in action. They have learned, followed and implemented all recommended PPE and safety protocols.

When it was determined that it may not be safe for the day program to operate in person (mid March - mid July), and employers shuttered their doors to our supported workers, the creative and flexible staff developed remote services now offering 5 days a week, up to 6 hours per day of remote programming with a variety of community partners. This programming has helped people develop new skills, retain skills and reduce social isolation. Direct support day staff not involved in remote services were reassigned to residences to cover vacant shifts. Flexibility was key to our success.

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STAR staff did this and continue to do it for low compensation. Do you know many people willing to put their own lives and their families lives at risk for \$14.75 hr.? Many employees who were with us prior to the pandemic have stayed committed throughout this ordeal, but now we are facing staff shortages and as one Executive so aptly put it, a “hiring black hole” that is failing to produce new candidates. We continue to provide remote services to a large number of clients who live in their family home and do not yet have access to the vaccine – and will not until May. We are very concerned about being able to recruit the staff needed to meet their needs as they return to in-person services and expand to meet the increasing demand for our services, particularly to accommodate individuals whose programs have closed.

How do you live on \$14.75 hr.? You work two or three jobs. You apply for and receive other government benefits. You sacrifice time with your own children and families as you work through the exhaustion. And when your car breaks down, or you get behind on your bills, you take a loan on your pension. I believe we can and must do better than this in CT.

STAR never stopped providing services. The individuals living in our homes and apartments continued to receive the care they were accustomed to and at times greater due to their medical needs. Our day programs quickly pivot back and forth between in person and remote services based on exposure risk.

Our staff have worked long hours, endured difficult situations including wearing PPE equipment for extended periods of time; being directly exposed to Covid day after day and watching the people they support suffer, be afraid and even die. They are the real heroes during this pandemic and they deserve a reasonable wage.

As the Executive Director I have been awed by the commitment our staff have to the clients during this crisis, but I also am aware of the mental health toll it has taken on managers as well as direct care staff. I worry that after the crisis is over, staff will decided, they can no longer do this for the wage provided. And I worry we will not recruit staff at the low wage with no prospect of increases on an annual basis.

We must preserve the safety net created in CT and we can only do that with your support of increased funding each year for the non-profit sector.

In summary, since 2007, community nonprofits have lost at least \$461 million in state funding that has not kept pace with inflation or adequately covered increased costs and demand for services over the last thirteen years. Please:

1. Commit to increasing funding by the full \$461 million, or 28%, by Fiscal Year 2026;
2. Appropriate \$128 million (a state net of \$67 million after federal reimbursement) in new funding for community nonprofits in Fiscal Year 2022, a 7% increase;
3. Index increases to inflation, to ensure that state funding will keep pace with increased costs in the future, and
4. Please hold nonprofits financially harmless from the impact of COVID-19.

Thank you,


Katie Banzhaf

Executive Director

STAR, Inc., Lighting the Way...

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