

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

My name is Erin Gasparini, I work for Kuhn Employment Opportunities, a nonprofit that assists individuals with developmental and psychiatric disabilities in programs designed to increase their skills, and prepare them for community based employment. We have been around since 1960 and serve over 400 individuals each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefor.

Community nonprofits provide essential services in every city and town in Connecticut, serving people in need and employing tens of thousands. They are what make Connecticut a great place to live and work.

I am would like to respectfully **request that the legislature appropriate \$461 million over five years for community nonprofits**. 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.
4. Hold nonprofits financially harmless from the impact of COVID-19.

At Kuhn we have seen our staff step up each day during the Covid-19 pandemic to support the participants we serve. In March when Covid first hit our area we had to reduce our in person services. Many of the participants served returned to their homes and lost their outlet, lost contact with friends, and for many they lost the reason for getting up each day. Families had to adjust their lives to support their loved ones who were home now. Many of our older adults became more sedentary and many lost their connection with the community entirely. We quickly created our Zoom program in our attempt to engage them each day. The joy that this brought to participants to see their friends, and the staff who they have missed was priceless. That first zoom group grew to what is now a program that is offered 5 days per week for 6 hours per day. Many families were able to return to work, and know that their loved one was connected virtually to Kuhn. Without the enthusiasm from Kuhn's direct care staff to keep this going, many individuals would still feel displaced and lonely.

One of our largest programs, our Group Supported Employment Program, has many janitorial contracts with state and private businesses. This is typically where we are able to support participants as they develop their skills to prepare them for independence at work. These businesses remained open and essential and were needing an increase in janitorial services due to Covid. This same, enthusiastic group of staff, stepped up each day to fill in while our participants were safe at home. They would work as porters at the local Department of Labor, they would clean up businesses impacted by Covid, all with the goal that we would continue to have these opportunities for our participants when their world was once again safe for them to return to work. The unselfish

dedication that I have witnessed from all of our staff during this time has been commendable.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of inadequate funding for nonprofit services and brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs and operational challenges for many community nonprofits, such as:

- Providing hazard pay for essential workers on the front lines with a higher risk of exposure;
- Procuring expensive and hard to find Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies;
- Creating telehealth services seemingly overnight, and purchasing necessary computers, cybersecurity, online meeting platforms and training for both staff and people receiving services.
- Many community nonprofits never closed their doors even as the pandemic worsened.

The staff, who I describe above are earning \$14.75/per hour. Many have lost their second and third jobs due to Covid, but they have continued to work each day, as they were committed to the positive impact that they were making for our participants. No cost of living increases and regular reductions of our budgets mean that we are consistently being asked to do more with less money. We now are seeing many of the participants we serve leave Kuhn due to a desire to remain safe. Additionally Kuhn has seen an unbudgeted increase in cleaning supplies and PPE. We continue to adjust how we are doing business, but without increases to agencies such as Kuhn, we will be unable to maintain our staffing levels which will ultimately mean we will need to make cuts in other areas as well.

Demand continues to increase as funding is cut.

Tuesday, March 2 – Health Subcommittee

Department of Developmental Services

- Please reinvest the proposed savings of \$4.1 million by transitioning approximately 300 people to Individual Supported Employment Services from group-supported employment or day services to serve people with I/DD, rather than balancing the budget.
- Please reinvest the proposed savings of \$2.3 million from funding reductions in the Behavioral Services Program to serve people with I/DD, rather than balancing the budget.
- Please ensure that the proposed savings of \$1 million in each fiscal year from closing one public Community Living Arrangement is reinvested to serve people with I/DD, rather than balancing the budget.

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

- The need for mental health and substance abuse treatment services is expected to grow significantly as we emerge from the pandemic. Now is the time to invest in substantial improvements and enhancements to the behavioral health system, not to time to flat-fund the DMHAS budget.
- Please support the \$6.3 million increase in Discharge & Diversion Services. Community nonprofits can help people avoid most costly care (EDs, jails, or shelters) and get them on a path toward recovery.

Department of Public Health

- Please oppose the funding reduction to LGBTQ Health and Human Services Network. The State needs to continue to provide safe environments for people recovering from mental health and substance use.

Thank you for hearing just one of the many stories of why it continues to be so important to invest in our services...in the people we serve. Even in tough times, we at Kuhn continue to be here to support those who are in need, we are asking you to help to support us to do that.

Sincerely,

Erin Gasparini

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