

Testimony of: Sarah Holmes  
Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury

Appropriations Committee

**HB 6349 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM  
ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

Department of Public Health - Rape Crisis Intervention and Prevention Services

March 1, 2021

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Sarah, I am a Community Educator for Elementary Education with Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury. We serve the Greater Waterbury region, including: Waterbury, Middlebury, Southbury, Oxford, Naugatuck, Beacon Falls, Prospect, Wolcott, Watertown, Woodbury, Bethlehem and Thomaston. Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury provides free and confidential services to sexual assault and domestic violence survivors and their loved ones. Some of these services include our toll-free 24-hour hotline, accompaniments throughout medical, court, and police procedures, individual counseling, prevention education, emergency shelter program and support groups.

In my role as a community educator, I provide education to students in grades Pre-K – 5<sup>th</sup> grade, focusing on the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault. Since September 2020, over 4,000 elementary school students in Waterbury have participated in Safe Haven violence prevention and social-emotional learning programs. Our programs teach children about bodily autonomy, appropriate and inappropriate touches and behaviors, developing self-esteem, characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and identifying trusted adults to go to for help. Prevention curriculum builds on protective factors and targets risk factors associated with both perpetration and victimization of domestic violence and sexual assault. Many schools we work with ask us to come in for a second visit with each class to cover healthy relationships with peers, discussing bullying, bystander intervention, and building a healthy school community.

In addition to our elementary curriculum, Safe Haven facilitates programming for students in middle school, high school, and local colleges and universities. Through our relationship with Waterbury Public Schools, we are able to work with children on an on-going basis throughout their educational careers. It's not uncommon for me to walk into a classroom and a student to say "I remember you!" or "Hey! It's Ms. Safe Haven!". Our ability to create positive, on-going relationships with students enhances our prevention education program by creating trust and mutual respect between students and Safe Haven educators.

Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury also provides programming for several after-school programs. We have a strong relationship with the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury. I facilitate their SMART Girls program, a program for girls in grades 3-5 focusing on social emotional learning, healthy relationships, self-esteem, and leadership development. We have also partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to facilitate the Youth Participatory Action Research Program through a grant funded by the Department of Public Health.

This year, we partnered with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Waterbury After School Program to work with students from 9 elementary schools across the city. These lessons focused on elements of social-emotional learning, including: identifying emotions, building empathy, developing coping skills, and emotional regulation. The focus on social-emotional learning is particularly important during the Covid-19 epidemic, as children are struggling to cope with the many challenges they face in the wake of the pandemic.

In these after school sessions, students have been candid with the challenges they have faced over the past year. Students have shared difficulties they've experienced with distance learning, stress and sadness they feel by being physically separated from their peers and teachers, issues they're dealing with at home, and struggling with having family members or friends who have gotten sick, or in some cases passed away, from Covid-19. Children have shared that they have lost someone they love to violence, discussed grief, shared about challenges with family dynamics, and had open conversations about mental health.

The funding we receive from the Department of Public Health makes all of this programming possible. Through funding from DPH, we are able to provide all of our programming free of charge to the schools and organizations we work with. Especially for schools and youth-serving organizations which are already challenged with underfunding, the availability of these free programs is essential in making sure that students have access to programming which reduces violence in our communities and supports the mental health and well-being of children.

Survivors need our support and services. While there is continued need and increased cost we urge you to keep the funding for rape crisis intervention and prevention services at nothing less than level funding. Increased funding increases our ability to provide comprehensive services to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, and enhances the prevention work we do within the communities we serve. Supporting the well-being of children now is an investment in the futures of our communities.

Thank you.

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