

Public Hearing on:
**H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June
Thirtieth, 2023, And Making Appropriations Therefor.**
Health Subcommittee
Tuesday, March 2, 10:00 am

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

My name is **Thomas Igoe**. I'm a resident of the State of Connecticut and a member of the Board of Directors and Treasurer of **Benhaven**, a non-profit that operates in the greater New Haven area serving the needs of autistic individuals and others with pervasive developmental disorders. Benhaven has been in successful operation for over 50 years, with its mission being to enable the people we serve to participate in community life, exercise productive control over their own lives, have meaningful relationships and associations, be gainfully employed, and experience happiness and personal satisfaction.

My wife and I have a 39-year old son who is autistic. He lives in his own apartment in New Haven and receives daily services from Benhaven's behaviorists and mentors so that he can live a satisfying and meaningful life. Over the last 10 years, largely because of the hard work, understanding, sensitivity and courage of the Benhaven staff, our son's life (and accordingly the life of our entire family) has improved immeasurably.

Community nonprofits like Benhaven 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. Our family can attest to that fact.

So I thank you for the opportunity to testify on the pending bill concerning the State budget and related appropriations. I have the following few points that I'd like to emphasize today:

- Benhaven strongly supports a \$461 million increase in State appropriations for non-profits by fiscal year 2026, starting with \$128 million in fiscal 2022.
- We also would note that 50% of this increase for DDS providers is reimbursed by the federal government through the Medicaid Home and Community Based Waivers.
- Benhaven is grateful for the wage increase that became effective two years ago for direct support staff workers of DDS providers like Benhaven, which brought the base hourly wage to \$14.75. That said, we strongly urge that regular ongoing wage adjustments should be implemented, indexed against the incremental increases designed to bring the minimum wage to \$15.

In this context, I'd like to note that the role of direct support staff is much more complex than is the case for typical minimum wage jobs. These staff have great responsibility for individuals with medical fragility and behavioral challenges. The work is governed by many regulations and training requirements that have to be met and continually considered. In Benhaven's Individual and Family Support (or "IFS") program (which works with our son), the direct support staff work independently with individuals and families and need to exert independent judgment to address many situations. These staff teach individuals skills to increase their abilities and independence.

In the group home settings, staff must dispense medications, implement behavioral programs, maintain residents' safety, and keep program data.

All this is tough work requiring a high level of skill, judgment, commitment and patience.

- We note that there has not been an overall COLA or rate increase for DDS providers in many years. Without this critical funding, providers cannot improve their infrastructure with up-to-date technology enhancements and training, nor can they respond to all needs for physical plant renovations and upgrades.
- Finally, we are very much opposed to the \$2.3 million reduction in the Behavioral Services Program funding that the Governor recommends. This account is used to support children and adolescents living at home with their

families who present very significant behavioral challenges. Our IFS program workers support many of these individuals, and their support in peoples' homes makes the situation much more manageable for families. These adolescents can then remain in their family homes for more years than would otherwise be possible.

Money becomes available when these adolescents become adults and have other funding from DDS. But it is essential that this funding remain in this account to help other families. Benhaven always has calls for this critical service from more families than we can properly serve in light of the limitation on funding support.

This completes my testimony. Thanks so much for listening.

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