

Testimony of Celina Kuemper
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, 2021

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

My name is Celina Kuemper, I am a Director at Journey Found, Inc. We are an organization based out of Manchester that provides services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout north central and southeastern CT.

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. I am here 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.

It saddens me to feel that I could essentially copy and paste most of my testimony from the testimony I gave last year at this time. Last year, I testified that community non-profits were in crisis due to a decade of underfunding. You will hear a lot of that same testimony today. I am not going to repeat those points. This year it's personal.

Here's how I described things to a friend : "... as the COVID numbers started to rise. It's almost like bombs dropping every day - you can't avoid it just scramble to pick up the pieces and make sure everyone is safe. But these people we support and the incredible staff keep me going because failure is not an option. We can rest when we win the war."

When I wrote this, I had two group homes under my direction that were COVID+. Eleven (11) people were impacted. Almost all of the staff were out, I had 2 staff and 2 people we support in the Hospital. One of those people is almost 80 years old. As I stood in her COVID isolation unit in the Hospital, all I could think about was that I had promised her sister that she would not die alone. She made it through the night, against all odds. And as our staff kept showing up in that COVID isolation room, on their own time since we could no longer bill for services after admission, she came back to us. To this day, her sister swears it was the love and support from her staff that brought her back.

This is what we do every day. Between December and January, I was averaging over 90 working hours a week, in addition to my 24/7 on call. I have worked shifts over 24 hours. I have had staff work over 48 hours in storms because there was just nobody to relieve them. I have had staff move into COVID+ programs so they wouldn't expose their families, working 18 hour shifts with 6 hour breaks. I have had staff living in their own basements, not because they were afraid of infecting their families but because they were worried their families would infect them and they would bring it into the group homes where we support extremely medically compromised people for whom this virus could be a death sentence.

These Direct Support staff, making \$15 an hour, have changed their entire lives to keep the people we support safe over the past year. It isn't just me working 90 hours a week, we all are, because there just aren't any other options and we refuse to give up on the amazing people we support. I have watched them put the lives of the people we support before their own and those of their own family. I have seen too many people not able to handle it. But the dedication I have seen from those of us still standing is something I will not soon forget.

"Sorry the money isn't available" isn't an option anymore. If as a state we value the vital services non-profits provide and the people we serve, Connecticut has to find a way to fund it so that we can hold this system together. In a state and country where the focus is on job creation and unemployment, we can't hire anyone because we can't pay them enough to be willing to do this job. The people we support require hands on care; there is no social distancing. Those of us still doing this are doing it because we love the people we support, and because we know there is nobody else. How many people do you know who would be willing to do what I have described for \$15 an hour? If you had a loved one with a disability being supported in this system, who would you want supporting them? Would you want the staff who is on a 48 hour shift, or the staff working 3 jobs to try to make ends meet or the temp agency staff that they have never met before? This is not a low-skill job. We support these people in every aspect of their lives. We run the home, the finances, pay the bills, provide and arrange their medical care, provide clinical support, follow individualized and in-depth behavior plans required to keep the people we support safe, track behaviors, track food intake and medications. And all of those things are secondary to actually supporting the person we are working with to live a life they want to live. The amazing people we support and the incredible staff who support them deserve better. Connecticut needs to do better.

Thank you.

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