



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 Heather LaTorra, the President and CEO of Marrakech. I have been working at Marrakech for the past 35 years and have been here too many times to count pleading with you, our representatives of this state, to value the people we support, our employees and the quality and cost effective critically essential services we bring to Connecticut by reimbursing us fairly for the services we are asked to provide, contracted to provide and paid to provide. We are basically your contracted employees.

Thank you Senator Osten and Rep. Walker for your bold statements at the press conference back in January about the need to increase funding for nonprofits. I was literally jumping up and down and shared it with everyone I knew. We have to make your statement a reality.

My plea is not for lofty pensions, actually pension is not something we have at all. I am asking for funding that we have lost for the past 14 years, since our last COLA, it is the 461 million over the next five fiscal years.

I imagine the state contracts with all sorts of companies to provide various services and products year after year, hundreds or more? I can't imagine that many companies that the state does business with such as paper supplies, snow removal, vehicle repairs, universities, etc., renewed with flat rates for 14 years in a row. I am deeply disappointed that these flat rates have been saved for us human service providers and our employees. I know that every contract I have on my desk to sign and renew has an inflationary increase which I fight tooth and nail, I may get it down, but I still need to pay. At this point there is no other conclusion I can come up with than we are devalued, the people we support, their families and friends, our staff, our services are considered critically essential, yet the collective us, are not as valued as all of your other contracts.

I speak to parents and families who have a sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, with disabilities. People who are looking for services in the future, people who need services today and people who have services now. I know families who ask me "just give **our staff** a raise because our services are in Fairfield County, because they are specially trained, because they....."

Do you know why they want us to pay our staff more?

They want them to stay. Everyone sleeps better at night. They want to make sure that our employees, 70% of who are black or brown, are valued, have a career path and will stay with their loved one who is happy, safe, participating in activities that fulfill their lives, learning to be more self-sufficient and well

cared for. Although over 50% of our 715 plus staff stay over 5 years, a majority of them hold other jobs to make ends meet.

In 2019, you utilized a significant amount of money to show our staff supporting people with developmental disabilities that they are not minimum wage workers. You ensured their wages were 46% more than minimum wage workers. Well this has been dwindling year after year and in just 5 months, if you do not commit to this ask, we are being **allocated by you** to pay our critically essential staff 13% more than minimum wage workers, who are also promised increases each year, **allocated by you**.

We remained open during COVID, although we did not qualify for PPP money because of our size. 56% of our employees changed their job duties, work shifts, work sites and some actually packed their bags, left their families and moved into our congregate living sites so that we were able to successfully reduce the amount of human to human contact and successfully stopped the spread of COVID in these sites within 13 days of our first positive case, for both the people we support and our staff. We are thankful for the Federal Government CRF funds however these funds have limitations and we have had some new significant expenses that have not been covered as of yet.

I usually feel as if I am preaching to the choir when I am here with you. You who have been here, the co-chairs and others on this and the Human Service Committee have been speaking out on our behalf have been giving us hope, especially this year. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for that.

However the Governor's budget does not grant an increase for the human service nonprofits, and I hear the questions from legislators such as how can we commit to the future for this, how we will find this money? You pay for what you value most. Please value us the thousands of lives we touch and support.

Heather LaTorra
President and CEO Marrakech, Inc.

More information:

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 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. 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.