

February 27, 2021

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

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.**

My name is Heather-Renae Paul, and I work at Reliance Health, a non-profit mental health agency in Downtown Norwich. I am a Unit Director for the Community Support Program and Mental Health Waiver program and I see first-hand the major effect our small non-profit budgets have on our employees and members.

Since Covid-19, the need for mental health services has never been higher and to be frank, it's not going away any time soon. With the stress of the pandemic and uncertain political climate, I have seen more people experience mental health in their lives, even for the first time, than ever before.

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.

The non-profit compensation is not matching the severity of the work we are doing each and every day. Severity meaning, any given hour someone could call you to say, "I feel like I am going to kill myself", "I really need assistance getting into a detox program", "I don't have anywhere to sleep tonight, ", "I am out of food", and the list goes on.

To tackle these tasks, us in the mental health non-profit sector provide a significant amount of active listening, emotional intelligence, and verbal input and output. Aside from that, we the have to go home and possibly deal with the struggle of putting food on our tables, paying bills with \$100 in our accounts, paying out of pocket for a medical appointment because our deductible is so high that it will never be reached, etc. It makes sense that staff are going elsewhere to find employment or just leaving their jobs, period.

It is a slap in the face and seriously offensive that the state of Connecticut is hiring at an average of \$33.00/hour, but my agency is only able to offer \$14.75/hour, to do the same, if not more work, with less resources.

Aside from the wage disparity, one month ago, I witnessed first-hand, a staff of mine who had to decide to leave the job she loved because she realized she could make more money through state aid given her specific circumstances. Let that resonate. She left because there was more money from state aid than what we can provide for employment compensation in the non-profit sector.

We work in the non profit sector because it's part of our core values and a passion of ours. We don't do it for the money, because there is none. We've just grown accustomed to surviving on poverty wages.

No one goes into the nonprofit sector expecting get rich, but shouldn't we have enough money so staff can continue to provide the services that people desperately need? At this point, they are leaving because of burn out and because they cannot afford to live. There is no work-life balance.

Issue is the work and services we provide are not sustainable with the budget we have now. I am tired to saying, "I believe in the state, this time things will change, the money is coming". I have been providing false promises to my staff and myself-everyday.

Something has got to change.

I know we can do better. We have to do better. Connecticut can do better.

Thank you for your time,

Heather-Renaé Paul
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