

**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:

I am Mackenzie Phelps, LMSW, Young Adult Services Clinician, with United Services, Inc. I work directly with our young adults with severe and persistent mental health seeking wrap around services. The program I work in directly supports young adults in building a strong foundation for a successful transition into adulthood.

United Services is the Local Mental Health Authority for 21 towns in Northeastern Connecticut. We are a nonprofit organization providing more than 30 programs to our community, including Outpatient Mental Health, Substance Abuse Treatment, Family Programs, and Crisis Services.

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.

I am here to respectfully **request that the legislature appropriate \$461 million over five years for community nonprofits.**

United Services is an essential healthcare provider and we have remained open throughout the pandemic. I have continued to work with clients to support them in the community through these trying times. Since the onset of the pandemic one year ago, the need for mental health services has drastically increased. I can easily recall this time last year when I was completing my degree and was working in the crisis department of two local emergency rooms. During this time it became apparent that more and more individuals who had never before sought out mental health care, were doing so and utilizing one of the highest levels of care.

Since transitioning to my role at United Services, I have continued to see the impacts of COVID-19 across all of our programs. Some of our programs are currently operating at a more than 200 percent increase in services compared to the same month in 2019. Staff has had to take on additional roles during this time to educate and inform our clients and the community about the COVID-19 pandemic, safety protocols, resources, and now the vaccine. Additionally, we have made efforts to support clients in obtaining much needed PPE and even have assisted them in obtaining COVID-19 testing despite the risk to our own health, all the while completing our regular duties and trying to process the pandemic ourselves.

Our programs have been chronically underfunded, and our staff who provide critical services to our community are alarmingly underpaid. Because this work is often intense and taxing to professionals, staff retention is already a constant battle. However, this only becomes a bigger challenge when staff is so underpaid. Not only does lack of pay make staff feel as if their work is undervalued and often unappreciated, but it also makes it very difficult for staff to meet their basic living needs. Many of my colleagues and myself often work additional jobs, or pick up extra shifts to attempt to supplement

income in any way possible. For those of us with student debt, payments are almost impossible, and future planning for ourselves becomes an added stress. Keeping staff in any position can be difficult, however when the level of work expected is not met with equal benefits, it simply becomes a losing battle. Due to the constant flow of staff coming and going, we also have fewer services available to support our clients. Ultimately, the care we are able to consistently offer our clients becomes determined by the ability for agencies to meet staff needs, which simply is not happening.

The need for mental health and substance abuse treatment services is expected to grow significantly as we emerge from the pandemic. Now is the time to invest in substantial improvements and enhancements to the behavioral health system, not to time to flat-fund the DMHAS budget. If the necessary steps are taken now, agencies can feel better supported and prepared to meet the needs of clients as we emerge from the pandemic.

Please support the \$6.3 million increase in Discharge & Diversion Services. Community nonprofits, such as United Services, help people avoid most costly care (EDs, jails, or shelters) and get them on a path toward recovery. We need these resources to respond to the needs in our community. Thank you.