

**TESTIMONY OF TRACEY WALKER
TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE
ON H.B. 6439 AAC THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING
JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS
THEREFOR
MARCH 2, 2021**



Good day Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and other distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony on H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023 and Making Appropriations Therefor.

I am Tracey Walker, CEO of Journey Found, a private nonprofit and unionized provider of residential and other support services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout north central and southeastern Connecticut.

Community nonprofits provide essential services throughout the state. Collectively, we employ tens of thousands of people providing programs and supports that greatly enrich the fabric of daily life. Community nonprofits are critical to providing a quality of life that makes Connecticut a place where people want to live and work. Yet Connecticut has not recognized this contribution through providing contracts and rates that reflect the true cost of services or kept pace with inflation since 2007. Based on inflation alone, this represents a loss of \$461 million and has dramatically strained the community service delivery system.

To rectify this situation, I join many of my colleagues in requesting that you appropriate \$461 million by FY 2026, a 28% increase. To start this process, I am requesting that at least \$128 million be appropriated for FY 2022. After federal reimbursement this would be \$67 million in state funds. Furthermore, I ask that contracts and rates for community nonprofits have increases that are indexed to inflation so that we can keep pace with the increasing costs of doing business moving forward.

The specific reasons for this request are as diverse as the community nonprofit providers themselves. For Journey Found, the reasons include wages and benefits, the costs of home ownership and infrastructure. In 2018 we were one of the fortunate DDS funded agencies that received funds specifically to raise starting wages to \$14.75 per hour. At the time, minimum wage in Connecticut was \$10.10 per hour giving us a much-needed boost in placing us far enough above minimum wage to attract the skilled workforce needed for the vulnerable people we serve. As the state minimum wage goes up, we need increased funding to maintain that \$4.65 difference. Journey Found staff are not doing minimum wage work and they need to be paid accordingly. The intellectually disabled people we support deserve a skilled and stable work force.

Journey Found is also a homeowner, owning eleven (11) of the group homes we manage. Our funding for maintaining and operating those homes has not increased. The costs of utilities, maintenance and upgrades have gone up while our funding has remained the same. These increased costs over which we have little control take away from our ability to offer training and staff development opportunities, tuition reimbursement, transportation to recreational activities and trips for those residing with us, program supplies, agency wide events, technology and more.



And COVID has only added to the burden. We are self-insured for health care and COVID testing for employees and their families on our plan has already cost us just under \$13,000. We have spent tens of thousands on PPE, we have increased personnel costs for overtime and the use of temp services due to absences for COVID related issues and the difficulty in attracting new staff. Not many people are willing to increase their exposure risk by taking on a direct care job in a group home if they are not already engaged in this type of work.

It is important to note that funding appropriated to community nonprofits needs to be done so in as flexible a manner as possible without designating specific use of funds. Agencies need to be able to utilize any increased funding where it is needed most in their organization and we are all different. The infrastructure and support needs vary based on the types of services offered. Please allow us to utilize increased funds where we need them within parameters that are broad enough to allow this flexibility while still maintaining accountability and transparency of spending.

I have one last request. Please allow the any savings as realized in the DDS budget through transitioning people to Individualized Supported Employment Services, reductions in the Behavioral Services Program or from closing public group homes to be reinvested in serving the I/DD community rather than to balance the budget.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.

Tracey Walker
CEO Journey Found
twalker@journeyfound.org
860-643-9844 x 102

