

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 Julie Zalegowski, I am the Interim Executive Director for HART United Inc. which is headquartered in North Haven CT. HART United is a private non-profit that provides supports to over 150 individuals with developmental disabilities in residential settings to include community living arrangements, independent homes, community residential services, and community companion homes throughout CT. HART United was founded over 38 years ago and our daily mission is to empower individuals with developmental disabilities and their families to have more choices and opportunities in the community.

We employ over 200 hundred employees, majority of the staff are working hands on supporting our individuals in their daily life. They love what they do and are so dedicated to the very vulnerable population we serve. Our staff are deemed essential but haven't receive a COLA increase since 2007. They have to work two jobs usually putting in 60-80 hours a week and are still living paycheck to paycheck. They earn a fraction of what State employees receive. I feel strongly that it is time to end the inequity, reimburse us fairly for the services we are required to provide and to value the work that we do, for the population we serve.

Minimum wage continues to increase as our direct care staff wages remain flat and have for the past two years at \$14.75 per hour. The private providers will not be able to stay ahead of the minimum wage crunch unless we are right funded and receive ongoing wage adjustments. The direct care job responsibilities include state required annual retraining, deescalating complex behaviors and supporting medically compromised individuals. The health, safety and wellbeing of the individuals we serve are in the hands of our direct care staff. Providing direct care is far from a minimum wage job.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of inadequate funding for nonprofit services and brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs and operational challenges such as providing hazard "pandemic pay" for essential workers on the front lines with a higher risk of exposure; required to staff shifts during the day hours when clients normally would be at day program but day programs were closed due to the pandemic; purchasing computers and printers, online meeting platforms and setting up remote workstations for all of our administrative office staff.

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.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

Julie Zalewski
Interim Executive Director
HART United, Inc.