

Testimony on H.B. 6439

An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

Good afternoon/evening. My name is Heather Gates. I am the President/CEO of Community Health Resources. We are a behavioral health and foster care provider and Connecticut's first CCBHC.

CHR has always been there for individuals and families with the most significant mental health and substance use challenges. We never turn anyone away for lack of payment. We respond to crises in the community. We help the homeless find housing. We add programs and services to respond to overdose deaths. We respond to requests for help 24/7. We added a HERO Hotline to provide support to first responders and health care personnel last spring in response to COVID and stress related to work. We are an essential health care provider.

We did not miss a beat last spring when we converted many of our programs to telehealth in a two week period; opened urgent care centers to still see folks face to face; continued to provide residential care to 110 adults and children; maintained our crisis response teams including our embedded clinicians with local police; and offered remote services in schools.

But we also had to furlough 60 staff to manage the loss of revenue from COVID and lack of funding to keep us whole. We have spent over \$1.5 million on PPE, computers and software, hazard pay for staff, and retrofitting vehicles and office space to provide for the safety of our staff. We spent \$485,557 on hazard pay in December alone. Only \$184,607 was reimbursed with COVID \$ from DMHAS. Our DCF therapeutic group homes are running a deficit of \$229,000 through January. We need your help to stay financially strong and to keep doing what we do best – serve those in need.

These expenditures come at a time when we can ill afford it. We oppose the proposed budget for DCF, which would cut funding from and result in the closure of residential facilities for children operated by nonprofits. The Governor's budget reinvests some of that funding into the establishment of Quality Parenting Centers – but creating these centers should not come at the expense of other existing programs. Right now – in the midst of a pandemic when providers are working hard to ensure quality and access to care – is not the time to be taking funding OUT of the children's service delivery system.

We are requesting that DSS increase Medicaid rates for behavioral health services rather than have additional Federal funding go into the general fund. We know the need for mental health and substance use treatment services has never been greater and yet the rates have been stagnant for years. Overdose deaths are rising and teen suicide is increasing. Are we simply going to stand by and let this trend continue?

As you consider our request for \$461 over five years, \$128 million or 7% increase for next fiscal year, please ask yourself – if we were not here, who would care for the 27,000 children, families and adults who come to us for help?

We are deeply appreciative of the support and recognition we received from you of our efforts.

Thank you for your time.