



**Appropriations Committee
Human Services Subcommittee Public Hearing
Wednesday, March 3, 10:00 am**

**H.B. 6439 An Act Concerning The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June Thirtieth, 2023,
And Making Appropriations Therefor.**

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

My name is Margaret Hann and I am the Executive Director of the Bridge Family Center. The Bridge main office is located in West Hartford and we have 12 different program sites located throughout Connecticut. The Bridge served over 8,500 children and families last fiscal year. We have six residential programs for children in DCF care, three licensed mental health clinics, a family resource center and we are the Town of West Hartford's Youth Service Bureau.

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.

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.

The pandemic has negatively impacted the people the Bridge serves on many levels.

Our mental health clinics have seen a marked increase in people seeking our help. The Bridge has seen a 61% increase in counseling sessions. So many of our clients are already struggling with anxiety and depression-the isolation brought about by the pandemic has made their struggle so much worse.

We moved to a telehealth platform one week into COVID crisis. The Bridge made sure our clients could continue their care while maintaining their safety. Many of our families have lost income and have come to us for help for basic needs such as food. The Bridge has responded and made sure that over 200 families have food on their tables.

The youth in our congregate programs have also suffered in many ways. Many youth in the DCF system are trauma survivors and have diagnosed depression and mood disorders, exacerbated by the isolation of the pandemic, the uncertainty about the future, remote learning and less face to face contact with family and friends. Furthermore, most of the youth we serve have learning deficits caused by years in the system where they had multiple foster home and other placements. The enrollment delays and educational gaps caused by the logistics of many placement changes present a unique set of challenges. All of this has been made worse by the pandemic. The Bridge has served 106 youth in our congregate care programs since the COVID crisis began.

COVID has negatively impacted the Bridge by increasing expenses while not providing a reliable increase in funding. We are grateful for the short term support DCF providers have received but this does not help us in the long term. The Bridge pays incentives to staff to encourage them to work in programs that may expose them to the virus, we have deep cleaned programs that had COVID positive staff or residents which costs thousands of dollars, and we have purchased PPE to be used by staff and residents. The Bridge strives to provide a safe environment for residents and staff. Insufficient funding combined with the increased financial pressures of a pandemic make it extremely difficult to meet the demand for services.

Lack of appropriate funding increases in our DCF contracts have made it virtually impossible to hire staff. We are unable to offer a starting pay that will make us competitive with other Connecticut employers. Prospective employees can make more money at Target or Amazon than being a Youth Worker in our programs. Low starting pay combined with escalating healthcare, utility rates, rent, repairs and maintenance, and food expense creates a funding shortfall that is nearly impossible to close. The inability to hire staff directly affects the services we provide. Providers are forced to escalate overtime and contract labor to cover staffing shortages which profoundly impacts our budget and burns out our staff. Many of our staff are forced to work two or three jobs just to make ends meet. Without staff we cannot run our programs.

As mentioned above, the Bridge moved to a telehealth platform within one week of the pandemic. This essential step came with a sizeable cost to our organization as we purchased new HIPAA compliant software, laptops, tablets, and training for our staff.

Department of Children and Families

The Bridge has worked in partnership with DCF for decades. Commissioner Dorantes has brought a fresh prospective, compassionate leadership and a willingness to work with providers. Even with our enthusiastic endorsement of her leadership there are issues that the Bridge, as a provider must bring forward.

The Bridge opposes 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, but not all, of that funding into the establishment of Quality Parenting Centers, which is laudable – but creating these centers should not come at the expense of other existing programs. In addition, we are concerned that none of the Governor's bills implementing the budget include the changes to Connecticut's zoning statutes that would be necessary to allow this proposed change in existing congregate facilities to occur.

The Governor's budget assumes that the congregate system has excess capacity, but that claim doesn't match our experience on the ground operating programs for children.

The Bridge operates 6 congregate care programs-we served 106 youth during the pandemic. In all of these programs, we serve youth who have had numerous foster care placements in their short lives sometimes upwards of 12 or more. By the time these young people arrive at our door they have been rejected by several families which is very personal and damaging. They are basically failing up in the system. While the Bridge applauds DCF's mission of assuring that all youth have the opportunity to live in a family, this type of environment is not for all of our children. Repeatedly placing a young person in a foster home where they experience rejection is damaging to both the child and the foster care system.

DCF youth in congregate care settings is now well below 10%. A further reduction in congregate care will result in more young people being placed in living situations that do not fit their needs resulting in more rejection and damage. The Bridge opposes more reduction to congregate care until a determination has been made if the current path is working. We need to look beyond the data to hear the stories of young people.

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.

Thank you for your consideration on behalf of Connecticut's children and their families.

Respectfully,

**Margaret A. Hann
Executive Director
The Bridge Family Center**