

**Testimony of Sheri Stalsburg
Owner, Forest Hills Guest Home**

Re: H.B. No. 6439- AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Concerning

Department of Social Services Budget- Residential Care Home Funding
Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services Public Hearing, March 3, 2021

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the Department of Social Services Budget related to Residential Care Home Funding.

My name is Sheri Stalsburg and I am the Owner at Forest Hills Guest Home located in West Haven, CT. I am here today to raise concerns with the Governor's budget related to residential care homes and express the strong need for a rate increase for residential care homes throughout the state.

We are a 17 bed facility with many residents who are diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression, and other physical and mental disorders. Our staff work diligently to schedule doctors appointments, transportation, cook three meals per day and create diet/nutrition plans, handle medication management of each resident and organize a recreation program contributing to their Health and Wellness. Many of our residents don't have a lot of family, money, or much to look forward to. This pandemic only exasperated that feeling of loneliness and depression. Here at Forest Hills, to the best of our abilities, we give them that extra hope and fulfillment for a good life. Forest Hills is a family type environment, many of our residents spend 10+ years here. We celebrate every Birthday, milestone, super bowl, fitness goal, anything and everything to make our residents feel like family.

The biggest challenge with the lack of rate increases is the ability to pay our employees a fair wage. Never has this been more needed after our workers have put in countless hours of work in a challenging environment for little more than the minimum wage! Again, especially with the pandemic, many employees around the state find it more beneficial to stay at home, safe, and collect unemployment. Our workers are FRONT LINE, who not only wear PPE and risk their lives and families lives, they do it with a smile and because they CARE about each and every resident. Without question, the budget says that they do not receive the respect they deserve fiscally.

With our daily rate, our facility receives around \$3,000 per resident. For comparison, nearby private homes, nursing homes, etc. it's about \$10,000 per resident.

This is all done for a low cost to the state while providing care to some of the most vulnerable people in the state of Connecticut. Our home and other residential care homes have had to get by with rates failing to keep up with costs and yet we serve as a safety net for many people with mental health diagnoses and substance abuse issues. Unlike other providers, all our residents are state funded limiting our ability to cost shift and make up for low rates.

The inconsistent funding also challenges our business operations. We are constantly having to make repairs that are subject to state inspections and yet have virtually no margins to do so. With the amount of money the state pays, if there is a major expenditure, you almost always have to take out a loan. For many homes, owners may not be able to pay back which could result in the closings of many RCH's. This would be a disaster for the residents who consider these facilities as life-long "homes". It's been a very difficult decade with me having to put tens of thousands of dollars in personal loans just to stay afloat. Forest Hills has had an excellent reputation for nearly 40 years. With the current state funding, the upkeep of the facility just becomes increasingly more and more difficult. Maintenance, Utilities, Landscape, Improvements are all necessary to keep this home safe, secure, and a proud pillar of the community. While I am reaching retirement age, I worry for my residents and staff that have been an integral part of this journey.

Unlike other providers during the pandemic, we did not see any federal funding to support our work or our employees. The Governor's proposal to enable residential care homes to bill Medicaid acknowledges the need for higher rates. However, our industry has significant concerns with the proposal since it cuts money out of the state budget. That funding has been dedicated to residential care homes and becoming a Medicaid provider is a significant change to our model of care.

We value our employees who deserve so much more for the work they do for a challenging but rewarding population. We value our employees who deserve so much more for the work they do for a challenging but rewarding population. We have had to cut back on payroll and other key expenditures each year due to the state freeze. It's crippling these homes. While cost of living and daily expenses continue to rise, we have not seen any positive or forward momentum from the state fiscally. Employees have had to receive licenses for Food and Safety, Cooking, Medication Training, etc. while receiving the same pay. This has made it nearly impossible to find new employees and maintain current staff.

Unfortunately, paying employees the necessary wages to attract new people to our industry continues to be a challenge resulting in employee turnover. Our industry strives to employ people in long term careers so that they can establish and maintain relationships with our residents. This leads to better long-term health outcomes, stability in the home and savings to our state

Please support residential care home funding and uncap our rates so that we can keep our great employees and pay them fairer wages while they care for some of the most vulnerable in the state.

Sheri Stalsburg



Owner, **Forest Hills Guest Home**
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