



March 1, 2021

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

My name is Gary Steck. I am the Chief Executive Officer at **Wellmore Behavioral Health, Inc.**, based in Waterbury. The **Mission of Wellmore** is to promote lifetime wellness through a continuum of essential and innovative treatment and support services for children, adolescents, adults, and families. In a typical year, our programs touch the lives of over 10,000 residents of the 43 communities in western Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony 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.

**Wellmore** was hit hard by the COVID19 pandemic. At the time it began we had over 5,000 open clients, 60 living in our residential sites and many in high-risk situations. Initially we were forced to convert to mostly tele-health but we quickly adapted our approach and by early May we developed the capacity for face-to-face care options in all our programs which continue to this day. We are committed to offering families the choice of how they wish to be seen. We also committed to keeping our staff in-tact and issued no lay-offs despite experiencing a massive reduction in billing/fee income, a loss of most of our planned fundraising and dramatic new costs. *We've managed to sustain the access we committed to but need an infusion of resources for the State funded contracts we hold which have been massively under-funded the last decade.*

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of inadequate funding for nonprofit services and brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs and operational challenges for many community nonprofits, such as:

- Providing hazard pay for essential workers on the front lines with a higher risk of exposure;
- Procuring expensive and hard to find Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies;
- Creating telehealth services seemingly overnight, and purchasing necessary computers, cybersecurity, online meeting platforms and training for both staff and people receiving services.
- Many community nonprofits never closed their doors even as the pandemic worsened.

Over the last decade every category of expense **Wellmore** incurs has increased dramatically and we've also had to close multiple programs and offices as the direct result of State budget cuts. Yet, State funding has remained flat. Our cost for health insurance for our staff has doubled, we've seen alarming increases in our business insurance and worker's compensation cost. Our landlords and vendors have all increased their charges to us for goods and services. Our staff sacrifices every day with wages that are far less than their peers make in government service. It is very difficult to sustain our workforce with many staff departing for higher paid positions. Our clients deserve stable treatment relationships with their providers, please help us keep our workforce in-tact by increasing the funding on all State non-profit contracts.

### Department of Children and Families

- 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 system has already been cut to the bone. **Wellmore** alone had 2 DCF residential programs closed due to prior budget cuts.
- 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.
- The Governor's budget assumes that the congregate system has excess capacity, but that claim doesn't match our what we see on the ground operating programs for children. A focus of our group home has been to help adolescents who are transitioning or gender discerning. In our experience there are few foster homes or other family setting that will take in older adolescents, especially those with significant emotional scars and challenges.
- 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.
- 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.

**Thank you for your consideration. At Wellmore we stand prepared to be a solution for the State of Connecticut and its citizens as the recovery from the pandemic begins. Please help us remain a resource for the thousands that count on us every day!**

Sincerely,



**Gary M. Steck, LMFT**  
**Chief Executive Officer**