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Department of Children and Families
SEIU District 1199 New England
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Morning Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee. My name is Ellen Whelan and I am the Supervising Psychologist at DCF's Albert J. Solnit Center. I have been a state employee for over 13 years. I'm here today to talk about the need to expand preventative services at DCF, and to ask that you restore the cuts that the Governor's budget makes.

My duties involve supervising clinicians as well as providing individual, family and group therapy to the most vulnerable youth and families in the state who have frequently been the victims of horrific traumas and faced stigma and bias related to mental health challenges, race and socioeconomic status.

Expanding services to better assess and treat substance abuse and intimate partner violence is greatly needed. Disparities related to child welfare involvement and out of home care also need to be addressed through continued innovative programming, resources and education to address implicit bias.

Disparities related to race and socioeconomic status occur at every point of involvement in the DCF system. These disparities of black and brown youth in the system begin with the initial Careline calls. **60%** of the calls to the Careline are from educators. I facilitate Implicit Bias trainings at my facility and as I was preparing for my training role, I was shocked to learn that approximately **90%** of our CT teachers are White, non-Hispanic, which obviously leads to representation problems and highlights the intersection of our systems.

The disparities continue through which Careline calls are accepted and investigated, who is Committed to the Department, and which youth who are found to not be able to return home are then placed in congregate care rather than kinship homes or foster care. We need to do better.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on racial & ethnic disparities in access to mental health & substance use. Therefore, expanded services at DCF is essential as they are servicing youth and families of color who are facing the global Covid-19 pandemic with the associated social isolation, financial implications and learning poverty, in addition to the racism pandemic which further threatens their learning and experience of safety.

Working through the pandemic in a residential program where youth and families could not see each other in person for many months has been not only extremely heartbreaking, but also incredibly challenging as our usual opportunities for youth to generalize skills learned in treatment while in the community and at their homes with their families are no longer available.

We know that suicide had been on the rise prior to the pandemic and a recent CDC report confirmed the need for expanding services with child and adolescent anxiety, depression and suicidality having been exacerbated with the decrease in access to services, types of services, and decrease in supportive environments for our youth and families with the greatest needs. Substance abuse and intimate partner violence has also increased following isolation associated with the pandemic.

Cutting services will only increase the hardships and challenges for those already struggling with isolation and economic impacts of the global pandemic as well as stigma and bias related to socioeconomic status and the racism pandemic, so I'm here today to ask that you restore the cuts to DCF's budget and do what we know we need to do as a state – expand services.