



**Testimony for the
Appropriations Committee of
Jennifer Widness, President
Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
March 4, 2021**

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On behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges, I am submitting testimony on **H.B. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**, pertaining to funding for the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program. Governor Lamont has proposed to flat fund this program in FY 22 and FY 23, at \$33.3 million in each year.

By way of background, the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program is the state's need-based financial aid program administered by the Office of Higher Education that provides scholarships to needy Connecticut students attending Connecticut institutions – public and private. Students at independent colleges received approximately 17% of the funding from this program in FY 21.

In the fall of 2020, the Governor thoughtfully allocated \$6.8 million towards the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program from the federal [Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund](#). **We would ask that the appropriation in the biennium be increased accordingly to \$40.1 each year so students and institutions are not faced with a reduction in financial aid this fall.**

The appropriation for this program has been flat for many years and has been cut nearly 50% since FY 11 (Fig. 's 1 & 2). These cuts have led to significant unmet need prior to the pandemic with less than 30% of eligible recipients in the state receiving a grant from the program in 2019. (Fig. 3). Now due to the pandemic, need has only increased.

Investing more in financial aid for Connecticut students will help ensure Connecticut students can stay enrolled and continue progressing towards earning a degree while Connecticut's economy stabilizes and will also help the institutions maintain some semblance of fiscal stability. Private, non-profit colleges in Connecticut have faced over \$225 million in lost revenue and new costs related to the pandemic and federal assistance has covered less than 30% of those losses thus far.

We are pleased that the Governor's Office has put forth a number of proposals to increase access to post-secondary opportunities as part of his Workforce plan. But there needs to also be an investment in financial aid to ensure equitable access for those strategies to be successful. Other states understand this connection and have increased their investments in financial aid. Meanwhile, Connecticut now lags the region and the nation in this area. (Fig. 4).

We understand that the state continues to face significant fiscal challenges but given those very challenges, funding for need-based financial aid must be a priority to provide access and opportunity to higher education for low-income residents of this state in an effort to grow our state's economy and close our equity gaps.

Figure 1.

Historic Funding Levels of Roberta Willis Scholarship Program

FY 15	FY 16	FY 17	FY 18	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21
\$42 million	\$39 million	\$36 million	\$35 million	\$33 million	\$33 million	\$33 million + \$6.8 million in GEER

Figure 2.

Funding for State Financial Aid in CT: FY 09 - FY 21

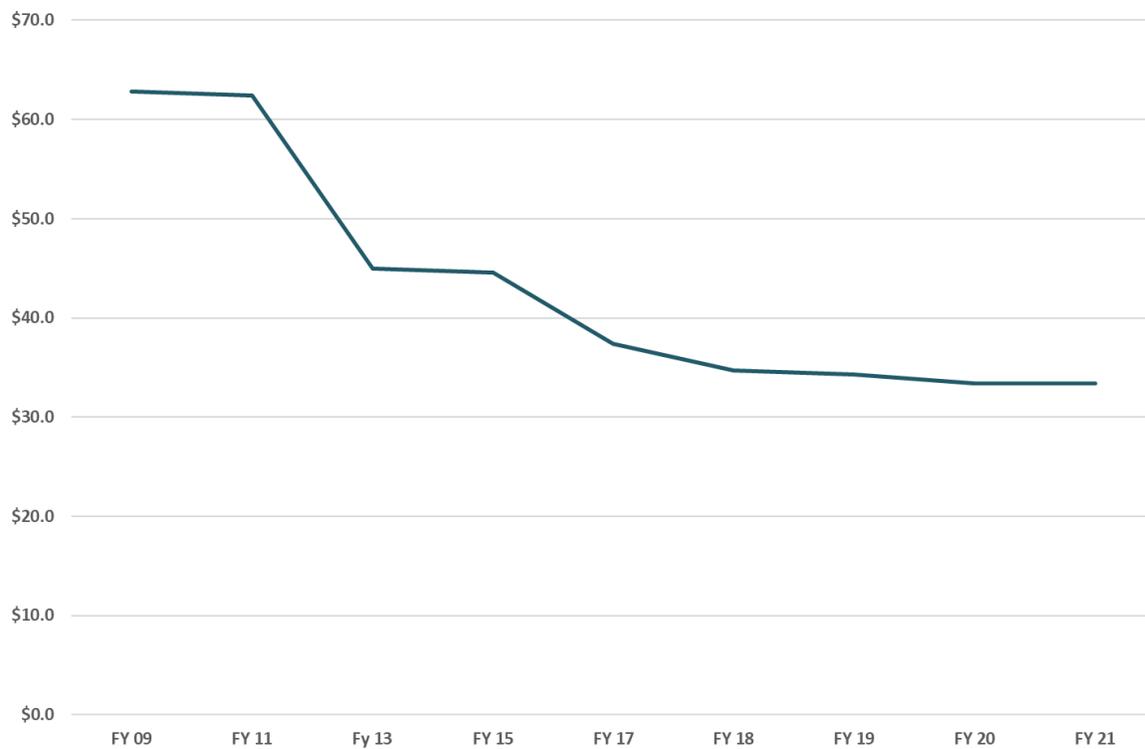


Figure 3.

High Percentage of Unmet Need in CT

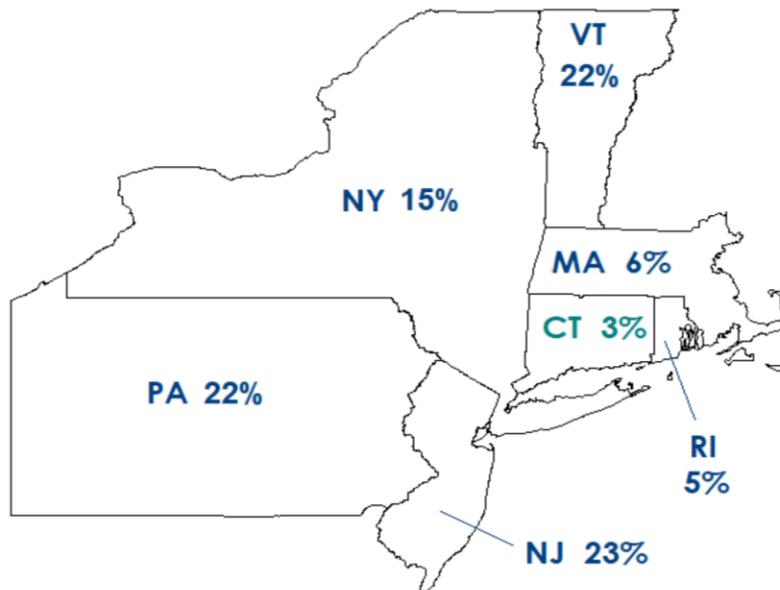
	CT Students Eligible to Receive RWSP	Total CT Students Awarded RWSP
Community Colleges	12,907	4,372
CT State Universities	12,153	2,918
UConn	7,566	1,909
CCIC	6,763	1,894
TOTAL	39,389	11,093

Only 28% of eligible CT students received a state need-based grant in FY 19.

Figure 4.

Percent of State Higher Education Funding Allocated to Need Based Aid

Source: NASSGAP Annual Survey, 2018-19



Connecticut's investment in need-based aid is among the lowest in the region and in the nation. In fact, forty-three other states in the US spend a greater percentage of state funding for higher education on student aid than CT.