



Testimony of

Liz Bryden, Chief Operating Officer, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Hartford

Re: Office of Early Childhood Funding

H.B. No. 6439 (COMM) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR
Appropriations Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee,
March 9, 2021 Public Hearing

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. No. 6439- AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR, my name is Liz Bryden and I am the COO of Catholic Charities, Inc. - Archdiocese of Hartford.

Catholic Charities is a family and children's human services agency which employs over 420 human service delivery professionals and provides services to over 18,000 individuals and families without regard to race, religion, or economic circumstances each year. As a multiservice agency we serve adults and children with significant mental illness, substance use disorders, physical and intellectual disabilities, and victims of domestic or community violence. Our services also include early childhood education, infant toddler care, elderly services, migration and refugee services, as well as family support and education to name a few. We are among the 500+ member agencies of The CT Community Nonprofit Alliance (The Alliance).

I respectfully **request that the legislature appropriate adequate funding for early education programs that are administered by 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.

Now more than ever, increased funding for early childhood programs is needed if we are to ensure our children's success in the future. The funding for these programs must allow for livable wages for the educators, most of whom have not had an increase in years. If we agree that our children are the future, then we must invest in their education from the very beginning. Constant teacher turnover is extremely costly for agencies but, more importantly, it disrupts the children's education and they experience a sense of loss every time a teacher must make the difficult decision to leave the classroom in order to make an adequate salary. When children are unable to form strong positive relationships with teachers early on due to constant turnover, it can affect their sense of safety and security in school and ultimately, their educational success. Investing in early childhood programs will provide children with the stable foundation they need to be successful in their academic career and beyond.

As a result of inadequate funding our organization has not been able to provide for our early education programs staff a market competitive wage for over 10 years. This presents a significant struggle in maintaining a quality workforce as on many occasions our employees have moved on to state employment or similar jobs elsewhere for significantly higher wages and better benefits.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of inadequate funding and brought unanticipated and unbudgeted costs and operational challenges. Catholic Charities never closed our doors in the past year. However, in order to remain open, our organization provided hazard pay for essential workers; we had covered the cost of expensive and hard to find Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies; we have created remote learning services and purchased necessary computers, cybersecurity, online meeting platforms and training for both staff and people receiving services.

Please support the proposed \$1 million increase in Birth to Three in FY23. The funding amount reflects historical levels of case load growth. These services meet the developmental and health-related needs of infants and toddlers who have delays or disabilities and their families. Increasing caseload growth will allow more children in need to receive these essential services. Every dollar invested in Birth to Three programs saves the State significant financial resources in terms of special education service needs in the future.

Also, please support the \$1.4 million increase in FY22 and FY23 for the restoration of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership funding, which reflects continued federal funding. The Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) initiative brings together the best of Early Head Start and child care through layering of funding to provide comprehensive and continuous services to low-income infants, toddlers, and their families. EHS-CCP enhances developmental services and supports for low-income infants and toddlers, and their families, by providing strong relationship-based experiences and preparing them for the transition into Head Start and preschool.

The legislature has an opportunity to address this reimbursement gap by properly investing in the nonprofit sector. At this time when Connecticut's projected surplus continues to grow, and additional federal dollars are provided, policymakers simply can't afford not to do this. **Our employees are some of the hardest working professionals across the state who have worked on the frontlines during this pandemic. Our staff have had to bear the burden of underfunding, going years without salary increases while simultaneously watching benefit packages deteriorate!**

This investment of resources represents an opportunity to improve the quality of life and economic activity in your communities for your constituents. Investing in nonprofit providers will improve service delivery, increase economic activity, and save taxpayer money. I ask for your commitment now to invest in community nonprofits like Catholic Charities.

Failure to act will have dire consequences. There is a myth that nonprofits will continue to deliver services in the face of budget cuts. The truth is budget cuts and flat funding have resulted in harm to people who depend on nonprofit services and those who deliver those services, and without significant investment now, the nonprofit human services delivery system will be further pushed to its limits and many of us will have to further reduce operations or close programs and locations all together.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, or for additional information.

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