Wellmore
Behavioral Health
Wellness for a lifetime

Appropriations Committee
Human Services Subcommittee
February 23, 2022

Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Children and Families)

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Gary Steck and I am the CEO of Wellmore Behavioral Health. Wellmore is a 70 year old life span behavioral health provider that serves about 9000 residents of western Connecticut each year. We operate one of Connecticut's oldest children's outpatient programs ('child guidance clinics'), the mobile crisis intervention service (for children) for western Connecticut and many other DCF funded treatment, home-based or early intervention programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and fund services by $461 million over five years – or an additional 8% in Fiscal Year 2023.

Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Wellmore took the unconventional path of committing to maintaining face to face care choices for all our programs during the pandemic, including walk-in admissions. This was a difficult but necessary approach to support the communities we serve during this time of great challenge and need. We are proud of the positive impact we've made but need your help to continue this commitment. We too, like all other businesses, have been hit hard by the 'great resignation' with many of our caregivers leaving for higher paying jobs, to relocate, take care of family members or in some cases to retire or leave the field entirely. We struggle with maintaining sufficient staffing which has resulted in long wait list for some key services such as IICAPS (home based intensive treatment for youth). We've also taken on many new expenses not covered by our state contracts out of necessity (eg. hazard pay; higher health care cost for our staff, other).

Human services are now in competition for staff with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives. Clinical staff are being lured away by lucrative offers from school districts and telehealth companies. Across the state, The Alliance

found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now. Over 40% of our staff positions turned over during the pandemic, we have almost 50 full time vacancies (approximately 20 are masters level clinicians) as I write this testimony. Each full-time clinician serves at least 100 clients a year so it is essential we refill these positions immediately but can't do it with the stagnant contract rates we have in place for our DCF funded services.

For children's providers, your commitment to increase funding by $461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for children's mental health services. As a provider serving Connecticut's children and families, I have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus on the children's mental health crisis this year. But I want to be clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the children's mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.**

The Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Children and Families funds new children's behavioral health services, for which we are thankful, but it does not provide support to existing services and programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for $461 million.

The Governor's budget does propose several new programs for children for which we urge your support. They will be helpful to stop children from backing up the hospital system with Emergency Department and inpatient utilization. These increases are:

- Expand Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding.
- Establish short-term urgent crisis services and sub-acute crisis stabilization units.

Children's mental health needs continues to increase, with providers seeing an unprecedented high volume of children and families with more acute illnesses – including those at high risk for suicide – as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on communities.

Community nonprofits are ready and able to support children and families struggling with mental health – but we need your help to ensure that current services are available and accessible.

Sincerely,

Gary M. Steck, LMFT
CEO, Wellmore Behavioral Health