UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE
Foundation of Connecticut

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 284: An Act Increasing the Age From Eight to Eighteen Years for an Income-Eligible Person to Obtain Medical Assistance Regardless of Immigration Status

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Chairs and members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 284: An Act Increasing the Age from Eight to Eighteen Years for an Income-Eligible Person to Obtain Medical Assistance Regardless of Immigration Status. I am Rosana G. Ferraro and am the Policy and Program Officer at Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut.

At Universal Health Care our mission is to accelerate the movement for health justice, and we recognize that health is a human right fundamentally related and core to social justice and equity. We support this bill because it is a matter of health equity and justice. Health equity means that everyone has the ability to reach their best health potential. When coverage is denied due to immigration status, and one is unable to obtain the medical care they need, it is an undeniable barrier to achieving best health potential. This is especially harmful when the group of people being denied coverage are children.

Our neighboring states, New York and Massachusetts, offer health care services to all children regardless of immigration status. California covers all immigrants, regardless of status, up to age 26 in their Medicaid program, known as Medi-Cal. It is our obligation to the well-being of our state's children to follow in these states' footsteps and expand HUSKY (Medicaid and CHIP) health coverage to all children.

In our work, we collect health care stories. We have heard the story of a mother whose child will age out of the current eight-year-old cut off before the policy will take effect in 2023, and fears for his future and health. Both pediatricians and parents agree that the current policy is not enough to ensure that children get the medical and psychological care that they need[1]. Children are being left behind with the current legislation, and we must act now to address this.

This is especially important as we face the physical and mental consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality in children have

[1] Otte, E. (February 16, 2022). *With Child Health Benefits to Start in 2023, a Push to Extend Husky to All Ages of Undocumented Immigrations.* CT Examiner. https://ctexaminer.com/2022/02/16/with-child-health-benefits-to-start-in-2023-a-push-to-extend-husky-to-all-ages-of-undocumented-immigrants/?fbclid=IwAR0S_EpN1QVLeAsyywOBKWHe-amLplEbfGHfs_wjhuZYABe-qMr2rG2etH0

skyrocketed since the pandemic. In a 2020 survey of 1,000 parents around the country, 71% of parents said the pandemic had taken a toll on the child's mental health, and a third of 3,300 high schoolers surveyed reported feeling unhappy or depressed much more than usual.[2]

Disparities in mental health care that existed before the pandemic have also been exacerbated. It was found that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had lower rates of counselors and school psychiatrists in their districts[3]. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the health disparities that have long existed in our health care system. SB 284 is a chance to address disparities that the prior legislation failed to address for one of our state's most vulnerable groups of people.

This policy is also cost saving through utilization of preventative care. Families and hospitals benefit from expanding Medicaid health coverage to all children. Current policy dictates that someone must be treated at an emergency room if their life is in danger – regardless of immigration status. However, in the end, for those undocumented over the age of 8 who are without access to HUSKY insurance, families end up with expensive bills and unable to afford crucial follow up care. Often, these severe situations and intense treatments could have been avoided with preventive care that, without HUSKY coverage, is inaccessible for many undocumented children and families.

Hospitals are also impacted. According to a 2019 annual report, uncompensated care costs Connecticut hospitals $806 million[4]. Expanding health care coverage helps everyone.

It is important to note, we support this bill as the next step towards providing HUSKY (Medicaid and CHIP) insurance to all regardless of immigration status. Medicaid coverage for all who are income eligible, regardless of status, would more comprehensively combat health disparities. The undocumented population in Connecticut had a staggering 58% uninsured rate, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Comparatively, Connecticut had a 6.3% uninsured rate overall, according to Kaiser Family Foundation. There is a substantial disparity in the uninsured rate. Expanding HUSKY programs to all, regardless of immigration status, would help to address this disparity and bring us a step closer to health equity.

HUSKY programs are the most appropriate way to cover low-income undocumented families. For years, HUSKY has worked efficiently and effectively, providing low-income families access to medical, behavioral health, dental and vision coverage with no cost sharing. This lack of cost sharing is critical to access because low-income families do not have the financial resources to afford health care coverage otherwise.

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[2] Abramson, A. (January 1, 2022). *Children's mental health is in crisis.* American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health
[3] Ibid.
[4] Office of Health Strategies. (September, 2020). *Annual Report on the Financial Status of Connecticut's Short Term Acute Care Hospitals for the Fiscal Year 2019.* Financial-Stability-Report_2019.pdf

By supporting the expansion of HUSKY (Medicaid and CHIP) for undocumented children over the age of 8 regardless of immigration status, Connecticut can take one step closer to health equity and justice. With this expansion, we can offer affordable and accessible options to the low-income uninsured and undocumented children of Connecticut. We urge the passage of SB 284, and for continued work to expand HUSKY to all income-eligible undocumented immigrants. Please support this important legislation – it is not only the right thing to do, but the only way forward.