



DATE: March 6, 2020  
TO: Public Health Committee  
FROM: Ben Shaiken, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance  
RE: **S.B. 247 An Act Concerning Mental Health Training of Emergency Medical Services Personnel**

Good morning Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Somers, Representative Petit and members of the Public Health Committee.

My name is Ben Shaiken, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy at the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance (The Alliance). The Alliance is the statewide association of community nonprofits. Community nonprofits provide essential services in every city and town in Connecticut, serving half a million people in need and employing 117,000 people across the State. They are an important part of what makes Connecticut a great place to live and work and an important piece of our economy.

**The Alliance is opposed to S.B. 247 without changes. S.B. 247 would weaken the requirement that applicants for paramedic licensure complete Mental Health First Aid training, allowing training programs and organizations not approved by the medical community.**

We are concerned that without additional guidelines and definitions the bill is vulnerable to interpretation, allowing training programs and organizations not approved by the medical community to fulfill the intended training. We recommend the following additions to ensure the integrity of the training received:

- (a) "Mental Health First Aid training" is defined as a training program that meets all of the following requirements:
- (1) It should be a peer-reviewed evidence-based training program;
  - (2) Provides instruction on recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental illness and substance use disorders, including common psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major clinical depression, and anxiety disorders, and common substance use disorders such as opioid and alcohol abuse;
  - (3) Provides knowledge of local resources and services to share with others who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenges;
  - (4) Provides training on how to safely de-escalate crisis situations involving individuals with a mental illness;
  - (5) Is proven to reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behavior in both emergency medical services personnel and those they help; and
  - (6) Includes in-person training with professionally certified instructors.

The Alliance sees this training as indispensable for first responders who are consistently on the frontlines of Connecticut's mental health and substance use crisis and we applaud the legislature's efforts to address the mental health crisis by codifying Mental Health First Aid in statute. Just as CPR training helps a person with no clinical training assist an individual following a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid training helps a person assist someone experiencing a mental health crisis, such as contemplating suicide. In both situations, the goal is to help support an individual until appropriate professional help arrives.

Mental Health First Aid training equips paramedics with the critical skills needed to identify and respond to the signs of mental illness and substance use. The course introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of mental health and substance use conditions, builds understanding of their effects and how they manifest, and provides an overview of common treatments and where to find them locally. Through role-playing and interactive exercises, the training provides participants concrete, context-specific skills to assess a mental health or substance use crisis, provide initial help and connect people to professional, peer, and social support systems as well as self-help resources.

Community nonprofits are the day-to-day providers of mental health care in the state, and therefore, we strongly urge the legislature to preserve the existing training requirement. Community nonprofits have a strong base of Mental Health First Aid trainers ready to provide training capacity to ensure timely and effective implementation of the training requirement.

The Mental Health First Aid program is supported and implemented by the National Council for Behavioral Health and its network of 82 state association members, including The Alliance. The National Council engages in fidelity monitoring of its instructors, which is designed to ensure that they are staying faithful to the program and manages an ongoing certification and recertification process so that the training is always up to date on the best practices. The program is implemented by local nonprofits, community groups, businesses, and government agencies. This means that certified instructors are often local and from the communities they serve.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these important issues. **We urge the Committee to take no action on S.B. 247 without amending it to include the provisions suggested in this testimony.**

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