



DATE: March 8, 2021
TO: Public Health Committee
FROM: Ben Shaiken, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance
RE: S.B. 102 An Act Concerning the Certification of Mental Health First Aid Training Programs

Good morning Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Hwang, Representative Petit and distinguished 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 more than 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.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony **in opposition to S.B. 102 An Act Concerning the Certification of Mental Health First Aid Training Programs**. We applaud the legislature's past efforts to address the mental health crisis by codifying Mental Health First Aid in statute in the past. S.B. 102 would weaken the requirement that applicants for paramedic licensure complete Mental Health First Aid training, because as drafted it allows for mental health training programs not approved by the medical community.

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. This training is indispensable for paramedics, as well as other first responders, clinicians, doctors, nurses, teachers and laypeople who are on the frontlines of Connecticut's mental health and substance use crisis, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and increased our fragilities.

S.B. 102 gives the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health the discretion to designate a different program than Mental Health First Aid to provide behavioral health training for paramedics. As drafted, the bill would not give the Commissioner any direction about the effectiveness or fidelity of any program she approved. Therefore, we urge the legislature to amend the bill to fulfill the original intent of the legislature when it added the requirement for paramedics to receive this training.

This proposed language would remove the exclusive reference to the National Council for Behavioral Health, as S.B. 102 as drafted does, but it would also ensure that only programs vetted by the medical community can be approved by the Commissioner.

We recommend the following language:

- (a) For the purposes of this section, "Mental Health First Aid Training" means a training program that meets all of the following requirements: (1) Is 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, 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 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 or virtual training with professionally certified instructors.

Mental Health First Aid training equips paramedics and others 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. The training provides participants concrete, context-specific skills to assess a mental health or substance use crisis, provide initial help and connect people to a professional, peer, and social support systems as well as self-help resources. Mental Health First Aid is available to all, and there are modules in the training specifically build for paramedics and other first responders. Nationally, about 2.5 million people are certified in Mental Health First Aid and there are over 15,000 certified instructors.

Community nonprofits provide behavioral health services to tens of thousands of Connecticut residents and work closely with first responders intervene when they are called to assist people in crisis. Community nonprofits also have a strong base of Mental Health First Aid trainers and training programs and stand ready to provide capacity to ensure timely and effective implementation of the training requirement in statute.

We believe the language we have proposed will ensure that Connecticut's paramedics, who are on the frontlines of our state's mental health and substance use crisis, are equipped with the comprehensive knowledge and skills they need to be effective.

Thank you for your consideration of this important topic. We urge the Committee to amend the bill to incorporate the language we have suggested.