



DATE: March 2, 2021
TO: Committee on Children
FROM: Ben Shaiken, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance
RE: H.B. 6509 An Act Concerning School-based Mental Health Clinics

Good morning Senator Anwar, Representative Linehan, Senator Martin, Representative Dauphinais and distinguished members of the Committee on Children.

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 regard to H.B. 6509 An Act Concerning School-based Mental Health Clinics. Community nonprofits provide services for tens of thousands of children and families across Connecticut. These services include those provided directly in schools, whether comprehensive physical and behavioral health services through School-Based Health Centers (SBHC) currently overseen by the Department of Public Health (DPH), or behavioral health services through off-site Outpatient Psychiatric Clinics for Children (OPCC) overseen by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Behavioral health services provided by an OPCC can be delivered in schools can be provided in direct partnership with the school district or under contract with an existing SBHC.

We appreciate the Committee's intention to increase the availability of behavioral health services for schoolchildren across Connecticut. We knew before the COVID-19 pandemic that behavioral health services were a significant unmet need for children. A 2018 survey from DPH indicated that over 30% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless and over 35% couldn't identify an adult in school to talk to if they had a problem.

We also know the trauma children have faced over the last year of the COVID-19 pandemic will turn a tidal wave into a tsunami, creating significantly higher demand for services. State government and local school districts have not yet created a comprehensive plan to address this inevitable increase in demand.

We are hopeful the significant influx of federal funding to school districts that is included in the American Rescue Act will cause school districts to make a substantial investment in behavioral health services. We encourage the legislature to address this issue now, as school districts need guidance from the State to properly and equitably allocate the emergency funds they will receive from the federal government.

We are concerned, however, that H.B. 6509 as currently drafted creates a duplicative process within state government. The bill creates a new "School-based mental health clinic," overseen, licensed and otherwise regulated by the Department of Public Health. However, the services such a new clinic provides are already provided in schools by DCF-licensed OPCCs. While the bill's intention to create

more behavioral health services in schools is laudable, the bill as drafted would add a layer to an already complicated and burdensome licensure process for the OPCCs who are already providing services in schools, and if passed, would likely act as a further burden to providers looking to expand their services to provide behavioral healthcare to more children and families.

We urge the Committee to address this concern before moving the bill as drafted forward. Thank you for your consideration of this important topic.