



Date: March 18, 2022
To: Appropriations Committee
From: Ben Shaiken, Director of Government Relations, The Alliance
Re: H.B. 5431 An Act Establishing a Council on Mental and Behavioral Health Program Oversight

Good morning, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Ben Shaiken, Director of Government Relations for the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance. The Alliance is the statewide organization representing the nonprofit sector. Community nonprofits provide essential services to over half a million individuals and families in Connecticut every year and employ 115,000 Connecticut workers, improving the quality of life in communities across the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 5431 An Act Establishing a Council on Mental and Behavioral Health Program Oversight.

H.B. 5431 would create new oversight council responsible for advising the DMHAS Commissioner and making regular reports to the legislature. The Alliance supports robust legislative oversight of the state's behavioral health system, but it is unclear how this new Council would interface with the existing oversight bodies, including the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council, the Alcohol and Drug Policy Council, the Children's Behavioral Health Plan Implementation Advisory Committee, the potential for a new Cabinet proposed by S.B. 2, and others.

Furthermore, while we appreciate how this council would be tasked with studying whether providers are being paid adequate rates to deliver services to Connecticut residents in need of behavioral health services, there is ample evidence and studies that conclude they are not. We would be happy to provide you with this information.

Connecticut's community nonprofits find themselves at a confluence of problems that taken together equal a nonprofit sector in crisis:

- Nonprofits were, at the beginning of last year, **\$461 million – 28% – behind inflation** since 2007;
- **Two years of covid exacerbated the impact of inadequate funding** and brought unanticipated, unbudgeted costs and operational challenges for most community nonprofits;

- The 4% increase in the current year was quickly absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, **inflation rose by almost 6%**, surpassing the COLA that is in the current year's budget;
- Adding to this **is a workforce crisis** the likes of which our members have never seen. A recent survey we did found that, of the 70 nonprofit respondents:
 - 91% said it has been difficult or extremely difficult to recruit employees this past year;
 - The average vacancy rate is 18%;
 - 68% report increased demand, meaning
 - 59% have waiting lists for things like opioid treatment, shelter, respite care and help for people returning to their communities after incarceration.

We do not have the luxury of time to address these issues. For behavioral health services, commitment to increase funding by \$461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for mental health and addiction services. We have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus and attention on this crisis this year. But we want to be clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.**

While we appreciate the intent of the bill, we respectfully request the Committee act swiftly to address the current funding and workforce crisis in Connecticut's behavioral health system..

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.