



Date: March 21, 2022

To: Education Committee

From: Ben Shaiken, Director of Government Relations, The Alliance

Re: S.B. 1 An Act Concerning Childhood Mental and Physical Health Services in Schools

Good morning, Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on S.B. 1 An Act Concerning Childhood Mental and Physical Health Services in Schools

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

First, we want to thank members of this committee, legislative leaders and the bipartisan coalition of legislators and leaders who have identified the children's mental health crisis as the top priority for the General Assembly this year. This crisis is not new, and many of the changes proposed in this bill are long overdue. The pandemic has been two years of continuous trauma for children and families and Connecticut must act now to meet the behavioral health needs of children for years to come. I appreciate the legislature's intent to do so.

In addition to adding new services and programs to the system, we respectfully request that the Committee consider bolstering the foundation on which mental health services are provided – a foundation based on community services that has eroded over time due to chronic underfunding.

There is no way to address the children's mental health crisis without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits. The legislature's commitment children's mental health must extend to the appropriations process and must increase funding for community nonprofit services.

As one example, this bill proposes to expand assessments of the behavioral health needs to children at pediatrician offices and schools, but children will need a place to go to receive treatment once their needs have been identified. Without it, they will just be added to growing waiting lists where they will languish unless we increase capacity of community services at the same time.

The bill proposes several measures regarding access to social work services in schools. In the school social worker system, social workers may only provide services during school hours in the school. When nonprofit providers offer these services, they combine them with other grant-funded services like care coordination so they can address issues of family mental health and substance abuse, housing insecurity, etc. We respectfully request that the Committee recommend these services be provided by a community nonprofit, who will be able to identify, address and help the family navigate through a range of services and programs to meet their needs in a holistic way. When well executed, community providers embedded in schools can provide care coordination and expand access to behavioral health care not just for the child but for the entire family. So often, children in need of mental health care or truancy intervention are dealing with significant behavioral health issues at home with their parents and caregivers.

We invite the Committees to seize the opportunity of this year's session to take concrete steps to fixing as many structural issues effecting Connecticut's children as possible. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue and for your dedication to making meaningful change to the children's mental health system.