



**Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony
In Support of**

Senate Bill 2, An Act Expanding Preschool Mental and Behavioral Services for Children

House Bill 5001, An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health

**Public Health and Children Committees
February 25, 2022**

Good afternoon, Senator Anwar, Representative Linehan, Senator Kelly, Representative Dauphinais, Senator Daugherty Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Hwang, Senator Somers, Representative Pettit and distinguished members of the Children and Public Health Committees. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit testimony **in support of Senate Bill 2, An Act Expanding Preschool Mental and Behavioral Services for Children and House Bill 5001, An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health.**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. As a community foundation, we manage approximately \$1 billion in assets. In the past two years, the Foundation has distributed a record-breaking \$97 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the Foundation has awarded grants of more than \$894 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and achieve equity in social and economic mobility in Greater Hartford's Black and Latinx communities, the Hartford Foundation supports addressing **basic human needs** in our region, applying an equity lens to the systems and programs that address food and housing, physical and mental health and the digital divide.

The Foundation is pleased to see the bipartisan efforts of General Assembly to expand access to mental health services for all Connecticut residents, especially children. The lack of access to adequate mental health services has been a concern for parents, caregivers, educators and healthcare providers for a very long time. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue as this public and economic health crisis has forced social isolation, disrupted routines and created additional stress on families and children. We have seen the distressing results, including an increase in the rising numbers of children and teens experiencing depression and committing suicide. Far too often the only resource for families with a child experiencing behavioral health issues is to show up at the nearest hospital emergency department. Data from the Children's Hospital Association from 2020 reported a 24 percent increase in mental health emergency visits in children aged 5 to 11 and a 31 percent increase among children aged 12 to 17.

As a community foundation that serves urban, suburban and rural communities, the Hartford Foundation recognizes the vital role that community-based nonprofits play in providing mental health services, particularly for low income families who often lack access to behavioral health care.



For example, the Foundation has been a long-time supporter of services provided by [Andover Hebron Marlborough Youth & Family Services, Inc. \(AHM\)](#) which is the primary source of providing human services and basic need supports to residents in the towns it serves. AHM's services are in high demand and the Foundation recently provided a grant to expand its counseling services at a critical time to meet the social and emotional needs of residents. In 2020 AHM surveyed RHAM High School and Middle School students and found that approximately 55 percent reported feeling a little or a great deal more depressed, anxious or lonely. The Foundation's support for AHM provides local residents—including youth—with access to affordable behavioral health services by addressing an underserved geographic area.

Starting 2019, the Foundation provided support for Hartford's six Brighter Futures Family Centers to move toward a more coordinated, networked structure under the Stronger Families, Stronger Futures – Hartford Family Center Network (developed and coordinated by [The Village for Families & Children](#)). Stronger Families, Stronger Futures is an innovative, holistic, trauma-informed network that aims to enhance the well-being of children and families by offering a spectrum of interconnected supports using a coordinated “no wrong door” approach. This includes connecting families to critical resources such as referrals for physical and behavioral health services.

The Foundation supports Senate Bill 2's provisions to increase funding to the Office of Early Childhood for Care4Kids, expanded preschool and mental and behavioral health services, and expand child mentoring and civic engagement programs by increasing funding to Department of Children and Families for child welfare and support services.

Stabilizing Connecticut's struggling childcare system, providing universal pre-K, and supporting staff will ensure that families with young children who need to work can have more access to quality affordable childcare services while supporting the development of our children. Increasing access to mentoring and civic engagement programs will also support the development of young children and working families.

The Foundation also supports Senate Bill 2's inclusion of greater supports for children and adolescents disconnected from school. In 2021 the Hartford Foundation, the City of Hartford and the Dalio Education announced a \$9.85 million investment in a comprehensive effort to support Hartford's opportunity youth, or individuals 16 – 24 who are currently disengaged from school or work. The funding supports [COMPASS Youth Collaborative](#), [Our Piece of the Pie](#) (OPP) and [Roca, Inc.](#) This investment will allow these organizations to provide individualized, trauma-informed, high-touch support through programs such as COMPASS' [Peacebuilders](#), [OPP's Youth Service Corps](#), and now [Roca \(which is new to our state\)](#). Roca also contracts with the Village for Children & Families to provide a Licensed Mental Health Clinician onsite for 20 hours per week to provide clinical behavioral and mental health supports._

The Foundation also supports Senate Bill 2's inclusion of measures to enhance families' engagement in social, emotional and academic development. For example, [Windsor Public Schools](#) has been providing Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Justice Practices and Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS) using a differentiated professional development model. Using a \$262,500 grant from the Foundation, the district's Office of Family and Community Partnerships supports wrap-around efforts as the district implements other interventions through research and evidence-based



strategies, including parent teacher home visits and a family resource center, which can include referrals for behavioral health services.

Through our investments in our local Alliance Districts, the Foundation recognizes the vital role our local school district's play in the lives of students beyond academics. This includes helping to ensure that all of students have access to nutritious food and physical and behavioral health services. **For these reasons, the Hartford Foundation supports House Bill 5001's proposal to establish a grant program to local school boards to hire social workers and school psychologists. We also support the creation of a new grant program for the delivery of school-based delivery of mental health services to children and adolescents.**

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to supporting those most in need during these historically challenging times. The Hartford Foundation is eager to partner with legislators, the administration, advocates, philanthropy and other stakeholders to ensure that our children and families receive the support they need to thrive.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.