

Testimony of

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Regarding the Public Health Provisions of Governor Lamont's Budget Proposal

Appropriations Committee

February 23, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the public health components of the governor's budget proposal.

On behalf of the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut (CHC/ACT), and its sixteen-member community health centers, I want to thank the Committee for its dedication to listening to Connecticut's residents about these important issues. Connecticut's community health centers serve more than 452,000 people each year – including over 262,000 HUSKY enrollees and 67,000 uninsured individuals – providing medical, behavioral health, dental, and some specialty care in hundreds of locations across the state.

Along with our health centers, CHC/ACT is deeply committed to providing access to high quality care for all people in Connecticut. To achieve that, we respectfully recommend the Committee consider the following:

1) Support the governor's recommended funding for flu vaccines

CHC/ACT appreciates and supports the governor's recommendation to include funding in the FY 2027 budget for flu vaccines for uninsured and underinsured adults. In 2024, community health centers provided flu vaccines to over 92,000 people across Connecticut, regardless of ability to pay. Health centers will be ideal partners for this new pilot program.

To maximize efficacy, we recommend ensuring that both regular and high-dose flu vaccines (i.e., those for people over age 65 and with respiratory illnesses) are included in this program.

2) Increase funding for School-Based Health Centers

School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) operate in dozens of school districts across the state, providing convenient access to quality health care for students during the school day. These are not school nurse offices; instead, they provide primary medical, behavioral, and sometimes dental care. They are often operated by community health centers or other local health care organizations, providing students with a nexus to care outside the school as well. Having health care providers within the schools removes barriers to access, like

transportation and family work obligations, and creates a healthier and better educated student body.

There are a couple hundred SBHCs across the state. Of those, about ninety receive partial funding from the state Department of Public Health (DPH). These sites are generally located in areas with high populations of low-income students, who are either on HUSKY or are without insurance. SBHCs provide these students with access to medical, behavioral health, and oral health on-site in their neighborhood schools.

SBHCs do bill commercial insurance and HUSKY, but no child is turned away for inability to pay. Grants from DPH help provide financial sustainability to ensure services are available for students when they need them. We respectfully ask the Appropriations Committee to continue to show their support for SBHCs and increase this vital funding. We urge you to ensure the School Based Health Center COLA remains a critical component of the current budget, allowing us to keep up amidst rising costs and inflation. We also recommend funding additional sites – as another 100 or so SBHCs are currently serving students without the state support that would provide stability and sustainability.

Your support is critical for the thousands of young people who face enormous boundaries to access consistent and comprehensive healthcare. By providing medical, behavioral, and oral health services directly where students learn, SBHCs help reduce chronic absenteeism, quickly address urgent health needs, and ensure that students can remain fully engaged in their education.

3) Provide funding to continue the State Loan Reimbursement Program for health care providers.

Since the beginning of the Community Health Center program in the 1960s, workforce has been its biggest challenge. Today, most health care organizations across Connecticut struggle to recruit and retain providers. This is due to a number of factors, including an aging population, the vertical integration and merging of health care entities, the high cost of academic training, and decreased interest in entering and staying in the health care field since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, not having enough providers is a barrier to providing and increasing access to health care services.

Over the years, the state and federal governments have attempted to address the high cost of medical school, dental school, and other training programs through loan repayment opportunities. For example, Community Health Centers participate in the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Loan Repayment Program, which serves as one method of recruiting physicians, nurse practitioners and other providers. Under NHSC, these providers work in underserved areas, including health centers, in exchange for repayment of some of their health professions school loans.

For the past two years, Connecticut has had a Student Loan Repayment Program (SLRP) for health professionals, that complements NHSC and is being administered by CT AHEC. This program serves a dual function, providing both loan relief and health access. Across 60 health care organizations in Connecticut, 188 health care professionals were awarded this funding. The program was funded with COVID-relief dollars and will be ending.

Last year, the legislature wisely passed Public Act 25-162, requiring the state Department of Public Health to establish (within available appropriations) a loan reimbursement program for health care providers. With that authority in place, CHC/ACT respectfully asks the Committee to add \$5 million in state funds to create this new program or allow the current program to continue.

The SLRP program is a good health policy and should continue its mission to increase access to care in Connecticut's underserved population areas.

Thank you for your consideration and your hard work on behalf of our great state. Please feel free to reach out with any questions: dpolun@chcact.org or 860.667.7820.