



State of Connecticut

DIVISION OF PUBLIC DEFENDER SERVICES

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**TESTIMONY OF SUSAN I. HAMILTON
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**PUBLIC HEALTH AND CHILDREN'S COMMITTEES
JOINT PUBLIC HEARING
FEBRUARY 25, 2022**

**RAISED BILL NO. 5001
AAC CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH**

The Division of Public Defender Services (DPDS) **supports *Raised Bill No. 5001 – An Act Concerning Children's Mental Health***. DPDS represents children in delinquency proceedings and both children and indigent parents in child protection proceedings. Many of the children we serve struggle with behavioral health needs that often go unmet due, in part, to the lack of timely access to high-quality mental health services. This can often lead to escalating behaviors in various settings, including school, and punitive sanctions such as arrest, suspension and expulsion along with avoidable stays in higher and more restrictive levels of care. This service gap can also contribute to unnecessary removals from home and delays in reunifying children and families following a foster care placement.

This bill provides a comprehensive plan to address this issue by increasing incentives and opportunities aimed at expanding and diversifying the pool of qualified clinicians to serve this population and increasing access to partial hospitalization programs and intensive outpatient programs for adolescents with mental or behavioral health issues. In addition, it would enhance the supports and

information provided to children with behavioral health needs who are truant from school and their families to better address those needs and improve school attendance and educational success.

The bill would also require 9-1-1 and public safety answering points to have licensed behavioral health, mental health and substance abuse providers on staff to provide crisis counseling and referral services to callers in need of those supports. In addition, it would require mental or behavioral health calls to be transferred to responders other than law enforcement, including, but not limited to, community organizations and mobile crisis teams. This will help to ensure a more tailored and effective response to crisis calls and avoid any unnecessary criminal response to behavior driven by unmet mental health needs.

The bill would also require DCF, in collaboration with the Department of Education, to develop a peer-to-peer mental health support program to help students in grades six to twelve with problem solving, decision-making, conflict and stress management. In addition, it would establish a DCF in-home respite care services fund to provide in-home care for children with behavioral health needs to provide their parents or guardians with some respite from caregiving. These collective efforts will help support vulnerable children and families in their own homes and communities and give rise to better outcomes and success.