



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF VERMONT**

Testimony of Tanya Benosky

March 29, 2018

Madam Chair, Members of the Committee.

As the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Burlington, I am grateful to be able to testify about the work we do in the interest of Vermont's most precious resource: our children.

Along with the Executive Directors of the four other Boys & Girls Clubs in Vermont, located in Rutland, Brattleboro, Washington County and Vergennes, we serve almost 4,000 youths each year. Although each club is unique, we share an identical mission: to 'inspire and enable youth in our communities, especially those who need us most, to realize their full potential as productive, healthy, caring and responsible citizens'.

For the past 75 years, the Clubs have worked with children who are struggling. Instead of treating them like they are problems that need to be fixed, we look at ourselves and our systems. We take responsibility for helping these children so that they may feel safe. We provide the tools they need to overcome obstacles and to grow into our next generation of empowered adults and leaders.

In Burlington, we've seen more behavioral challenges this school year than in any other year we can recall. Perhaps it's the uncertainty that many of us throughout the country now feel. Perhaps it's the opiate crisis that presents itself in neglect and damaged prospects of children. But, whatever the story, it's clear to us that our youth are facing more stress and likely more trauma than ever before.

I'll share with you a story of a now 20-year-old young man who is a former Club member and is currently on the staff at our Club. We met him when he was just 11 years old. After spending countless hours in our gym playing basketball with our middle school director, he disclosed that he and his siblings were being emotionally and physically abused at home. He was sleeping with a knife under his pillow because he didn't trust his father, especially when his father drank. Originally, we didn't know what was going on, but we knew that it was *something*. His grades were dropping, his teachers were frustrated and instead of being the kid who was helping others, he was kicking and fighting. We spoke with him about proper behavior. Instead of punishing him, we reached out knowing that it was our responsibility, as adults, to learn about what was happening. He trusted our staff and felt comfortable talking with them about the most personal details of his life. We helped him with his homework and worked with him to develop his own path into college. We spent time doing fun things and we connected him with

necessary supports in areas where we lacked expertise. His journey of healing still continues, but he is absolutely a success story. He will be headed to the University of Vermont after he earns his associate's degree this summer at the Community College of Vermont. In a recent staff training about trauma, he disclosed that he had scored a 7 out of 10 on the ACE questionnaire. Though he is thriving in school and is making good choices, he was discouraged to learn that his ACE score is connected to a 20 year reduction in life expectancy.

I'll also share the story of a Club father. His four children sporadically attend the Club. Though they often look tired and their clothes have been of questionable warmth this winter, they are funny, smart and curious kids. When this father comes to pick them up, he smells of cigarettes and is often harsh with them. He is regularly out of work, has chronic back problems and will often pull his kids out of the Club as punishment for their deeds "done wrong". Though this story is heartbreaking, it becomes even more tragic when we realized that this 30 year old man grew up with an incarcerated father, a mother who was abused by her many boyfriends and that he continues to behave in ways that he knows to be survival strategies. Without adequate support to buffer the impact of the severe stressors of his childhood, he now faces significant adult behavioral challenges and health risks.

These are just two stories out of thousands in our state. The benefit of proper supports is clear. With extremely limited financial resources, the Clubs in Vermont have done wonders for the lives of many children. We know that this work has impact. A 2015 study demonstrated that \$1 invested in a Boys & Girls Club returns \$9 of economic benefits to the individual and society. As further proof that our programs work, our Club members throughout the state report doing better than their peers on key health risk behavior measures. For example, Club members in Burlington report a much lower usage rate of addictive substances than their peers; 9% versus 30%. Though we are proud of this and more, we also know that we need to be better able to identify, talk about and address trauma and toxic stress. No one can do this hard work alone, and it is time for everyone to come together for the sake of our kids. We support S.261 and ask that the House pass it as is.