

Testimony May 7, 2025

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony to your committee.

My name is Kelly Bushey, and I am the Director of Connected Circles, a new therapeutic independent school in Berlin, VT. We serve twelve students between the ages of 12-22 who are often developmentally much younger. Our focus at Connected Circles is connection over compliance. Relationships with today's youth take priority. We believe and strive to offer "a community where all are seen, nurtured, and encouraged to embrace lifelong learning." Prior to Connected Circles, I was a Special Education Director for many years within the public school system. Through my professional experiences, I am able to see and understand the perspective of both public schools and independent schools.

We are in the final weeks of our second full official school year at Connected Circles. We have been in operation for three years, gaining our approval through the State Board of Education in March of 2023. Since this time, we have **only** needed to utilize physical restraint on two occasions and have never utilized seclusion. The first incident was when a student reported having a gun in his backpack and ran to get it; in order to maintain safety for all of the students and staff in our program, we used a restraint to manage this youth. The second incident was when a youth physically went after a staff member. For us, physical restraint is a last resort and for the purpose of safety only; however, we do have two Handle With Care Trainers on our staff and our full staff is trained annually in this practice, with a primary focus on de-escalation.

Anytime we need to use physical restraint, a comprehensive report is written by those directly involved using the guidelines set forth by law and the AOE. An after action review includes all staff and is approached with curiosity: curiosity around what the adults could have done differently that may have avoided the need for a restraint. We process the incident and work to repair the relationship with the youth and other members of our community that have been impacted (both students and staff). If we have identified areas in which the staff could have responded differently, we assume responsibility for this and process it with the youth.

The students we serve are referred to us through the special education process within Vermont public schools. They come from various backgrounds and caregiver situations. Some are in DCF custody, others live with grandparents or biological parents; have pending court cases for truancy or property destruction; have returned to Vermont after being in out-of-state residential treatment programs etc. Every single one of the students we support have experienced significant adversity throughout their young lives and many still go home to stressful environments every day. Often, by the time they come to Connected Circles, it is after a long period in which public schools have tried many different strategies and approaches to support them. Many have been restrained multiple times within their previous educational settings.

When students have come to us from programs in which the use of restraint is a regular practice, it can be incredibly challenging to help the student understand that we are not going to restrain them here and why. It takes many consistent positive experiences to build a trusting relationship and undo what these youth have learned by being restrained.

One example of the latter is a youth that has recently transitioned to us from an out of state residential program in which restraint was used regularly to manage their behavior. Unfortunately, we have been unable to have access to the data regarding these restraints. We are working very hard to build trust and to reassure him that we will not restrain him. When he arrived, we explained to him that we would hold him up only if he were a risk to himself or others. We shared that our goal is to help him learn to regulate himself, rather than using a restraint to physically manage him. Our role is to support him through his feelings and to provide strategies for him to learn to regulate himself in order to stay safe and not get to the point of physical management. This youth continues to push the boundaries of safety, to see how far he can go, before we restrain him; however, he has been with us since the beginning of this school year and we have not needed to physically manage him at all. I am so saddened to know that physical restraint was deemed to be the only option for this student previously when it has been proven to not be necessary here.

Dr. Lori Desautels describes neuroplasticity as how all of our relationships, environments, and experiences begin to change and shape how we perceive, sense, feel, think, and behave in our worlds. The youth that I refer to above will need many opportunities with others, particularly with adults in which he has a positive interaction and exchange, even while dysregulated, in order to change and shape how he perceives, feels and thinks about the world around him.

It is not about the behavior that we see. It is about where that behavior comes from - because a person's behavior is often an outward symptom of their nervous system. Connected Circles sees challenging behavior as a puzzle to work through- we ask what happened to them to cause them to react in such a way. We work with youth and their teams to heal from their lived experiences; rather than to physically manage the youth.

The use of restraint is coercive and often re-traumatizing; particularly for the population of youth that we serve. We believe in connections over compliance: when a youth is feeling safe and secure, learning will occur and young people will flourish! This work takes considerable patience, caring and time as youth need many consistent positive experiences with adults before they begin to establish a level of trust, as it has been taken away through the use of coercive tactics, such as restraint. In order for this trust to develop, many supportive experiences are provided and every success is celebrated.

This work also takes an understanding from our communities and policy makers of the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the developing body. It appears as though the youth who have had the most adverse experiences find themselves in places where the programs are perpetuating these adverse experiences through the use of restraint and seclusion. Alternative programs like Connected Circles are absolutely necessary to support the healing of today's youth. Unfortunately, programs like this are at significant risk through

the educational reform initiatives that are being considered as we speak. Given my professional experiences in both public and independent schools, I know that this type of therapeutic programming would be incredibly difficult to implement within the public school setting.

The environment in which the students show up every day matters. This includes the physical space, colors, spatial layout, visual interest flexibility of programming, and a solid team of people. We have a high student to staff ratio- to allow for flexibility, responsiveness and the support of each other- in order to best serve these youth. This work is not easy by any means but our people are passionate and today's youth deserve opportunities such as Connected Circles. Our youth of today deserve positive daily experiences to heal and grow from the significant challenges they have faced in their young lives.

I am available for questions, can offer to set up tours if anyone would like to get a closer look at what we are doing within our program. We are about to launch into a pretty big transition, as we are moving our program to the Goddard Campus to be a part of the Creative Campus that is being created. We are very excited about the opportunities and experiences that this change will bring for the youth that we serve.