



## House Democrats Press Office Legislative Office Building, Hartford, CT

### Press Clips

Wednesday, March 06, 2024

#### **Hartford Courant**

*CT Gov. Lamont pushing to get cellphones out of school classrooms*

*What if a local hospital goes broke? CT lacks receivership authority*

#### **CT Mirror**

*A cellphone use ban in schools? One CT town is experimenting*

*CT elder care bill gets mixed support from advocates, officials*

*Wide-ranging CT affordable housing bill sparks familiar arguments*

#### **CT Hearst**

*After years of struggles with job growth, can Connecticut's economy get its 'mojo' back?*

*CT election regulators want more oversight of local town and city political campaign finances*

*CT insurers would have to cover fertility treatments for singles and LGBTQ residents under bill*

*Opinion: How CT created an illusion of saving money*

*Committee Debates Expansion of Infertility Treatment Coverage*

*FOI Advocates: Bill Exempting Witness Statements On Police Body Cameras Is 'Overly Broad'*

*Affordable Housing Statute Faces Increased Scrutiny*

*Home Care Workers Edge Closer to Wage Increase and Benefits*

*Lamont Highlights Smartphone Lock-Up Program In Schools Inspired by China and Beyoncé*

#### **Republican American**

*Hateful words: Legislators want to study effects of hate speech on children*

*Lamont negotiates raise for home health aides*

#### **New Haven Register**

*Mayor Justin Elicker says New Haven is on-track to become largest CT city in 10 years*

**Hartford Business Journal**

*Should CT lower working age to address workforce shortage? General Assembly debates the issue*

# Hartford Courant

## *CT Gov. Lamont pushing to get cellphones out of school classrooms*

Christopher Keating

March 5, 2024

For many kids these days, cellphones are a constant companion, including at school, but Gov. Ned Lamont wants to change that.

Whether used by adults or children, the phones have become a 24-7 distraction and an ever-present staple of American life.

One Connecticut middle school has launched a pilot program to keep the phones out of the classroom. Gov. Ned Lamont and state Attorney General William Tong visited the Illing Middle School in Manchester on Tuesday to highlight the success of the program that has removed the ubiquitous distraction for seventh and eighth-graders.

The phones are kept in special, locked pouches all day long, and the students keep the pouches with them.

“If you were to walk around the building, you would not see a phone in this place — not in the classrooms, not in the cafeteria, not in the hallways,” said Matthew Geary, the Manchester schools superintendent. “Probably more than in any other space you walk to, the kids’ heads are up as they are walking by.”

Lamont brought major attention to the issue last month when he mentioned it during his State of the State address to a joint session of the General Assembly on opening day of the 2024 legislative session. Lamont told the standing-room-only crowd that “severe anxiety and aberrant behavior can be traced back to social media.”

Capturing the attention of legislators, Lamont continued, “Social media is often anti-social, and too much smartphone makes you stupid.”

In an attempt to improve the situation, Lamont said the best way was to take a “little bit from China and a little bit from Beyoncé.”

In China, children are limited in using TikTok to only one hour each day. At concerts by superstar Beyoncé, fans must place their phones in a “Yondr Pouch” — a special sleeve that locks magnetically and prevents use.

“We will be sending out guidance to your school board — have your younger students leave their smartphones at home or drop them in a Yondr pouch at the start of every school day,” Lamont said during the State of the State address.

On Tuesday, Lamont and Tong saw the Yondr pouches in action as students had them at the middle school that has been conducting the pilot program.

“How has the atmosphere changed in the last two months?” Lamont asked as he sat in a classroom with students in front of him.

“We have kids that are more engaged, as reported by our staff,” the superintendent responded. “There is a certain addiction. Definitely an adjustment period. We’re looking forward to focusing on learning. ... Way less social media chatter during the day. Overall, it’s a positive climate.”

Asked by Tong, school board chairman Chris Pattacini responded that the board had some initial pushback from concerned parents.

“We did have parents who were concerned about being able to get in touch with their children in the event of a security issue,” Pattacini said. “That’s certainly a valid concern. . . . Right now, the phones are out of sight and out of mind. They may or may not have a phone on them, but it’s not disrupting the classroom. That’s the key. . . . They’re going to go to high school. They’re going to graduate. They’re going to go get a job. They have to be able to manage that addiction of the cell phone.”

Tong said he has personal experience with social media and phone use because he has three children between the ages of 12 and 17.

“We’re really concerned about those platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok, and videos and messages that don’t make us feel good about ourselves,” Tong told the students. “Images of people that are obviously super-fit, beautiful, attractive, and don’t look like us and they’re unnaturally fit. For a lot of us, that can make us feel bad about ourselves.”

Asked if the program will be expanded to Manchester High School, Geary said, “I think we’ll have a conversation about that.”

High schoolers, he said, have different issues as they often have part-time jobs and need to be in contact with their employers.

The overall cost of the program is \$30,000 to purchase 1,000 to 1,200 Yondr pouches, along with special magnets that are used to unlock them. The school system owns the pouches and will collect them at the end of the school year so that they can be redistributed to incoming students in the next school year.

The middle school distributed a two-sided flier on the “pouch progress” that cited an influential article from The Atlantic magazine on the subject.

“Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011,” said the article by Jean M. Twenge, a California psychology professor and author. “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”

Asked by a veteran television reporter if he learned anything Tuesday from the students about his own cell phone use, Lamont laughed and quipped, “I think I’m a little addicted myself sometimes. But at least I’m not William Tong who came in with two phones on the desk.”

### *What if a local hospital goes broke? CT lacks receivership authority*

In October, as Gov. Ned Lamont was preparing to meet with state officials about a pending deal for Yale New Haven Health to purchase three troubled hospitals owned by Prospect Medical Holdings, an aide in Lamont’s office raised a concern about a gap in state law.

Officials from the public health and social services departments, along with members of the attorney general’s and governor’s offices, were to meet “to discuss what legal authority the state has to intervene if Prospect declares bankruptcy,” wrote Matthew Brokman, senior advisor to the governor.

“Other states [like Rhode Island] have clear authority to put a hospital into receivership, we do not.”

The Connecticut Mirror obtained the Oct. 15 email through a Freedom of Information Act request. Agencies involved in the initial meeting would not comment on that meeting or on whether the state has any plan in place if the California-based hospital chain were to file for bankruptcy, a move that could leave its three Connecticut hospitals in limbo.

The state's Office of Health Strategy, which oversees hospital mergers, closures and other transactions, confirmed the state does not have a direct path to take over hospitals through receivership, as it has with nursing homes.

In states with hospital receivership, a receiver may be appointed if the health department revokes a facility's license or if a hospital's administrators request receivership and the court finds there is a serious threat to the health and safety of patients. The receiver uses the facility's income and assets to try to correct the conditions posing a threat.

"Connecticut does not have a law that specifically allows for receivership of hospitals," Office of Health Strategy spokeswoman Tina Kumar Hyde said. "Building on ongoing, open communication between [state agencies] and our hospital system, the state will be prepared to monitor and assist with any challenges that arise from a disruption in service at any hospital."

But the absence of a hospital receivership law is raising concerns among some state officials and lawmakers who have been monitoring Prospect's financial situation in recent years.

The company bought and later closed Delaware County Memorial Hospital in Drexel Hill, Pa., and shuttered most services at a second facility, Springfield Hospital in Springfield, Pa. A local nonprofit and Pennsylvania's attorney general sued Prospect over the closure of Delaware County Memorial. In Connecticut, hospital executives said Prospect owes tens of millions of dollars to vendors and physicians under contract to provide services at its three hospitals — Waterbury, Manchester Memorial and Rockville General. The state filed liens against the company after it neglected to pay \$67 million in taxes.

Prospect is not the only health system struggling. In Massachusetts, the for-profit Steward Health Care, which owns 10 facilities, is tens of millions behind on its rent, and vendors and contractors aren't being paid, causing supply shortages, media outlets have reported.

State leaders in Connecticut are asking the legislature to explore reform, including a proposal that would require for-profit entities like Prospect to set aside a year's worth of operating expenses in the event of a bankruptcy and to consider instituting a clear path for hospital receivership.

"We have serious concerns about the expanding role of private equity and the consolidation of health care delivery in Connecticut," Attorney General William Tong said. "Our current laws and regulations are inadequate, and I am working closely with [Senate leadership] and other stakeholders on legislation to protect patients, health care providers and workers."

#### Legal options in Connecticut

Legal experts say hospital bankruptcy is rare in Connecticut. One of the most recent cases happened in 2008, when the parent company of Johnson Memorial Hospital in Stafford Springs sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

But if a hospital or health care system were to file for bankruptcy, that does not mean the facility would immediately close.

A judge can appoint a health care ombudsman to ensure patients are properly cared for while the hospital continues to operate. If the provider is being mismanaged, the court could also appoint a trustee to operate it while in bankruptcy, officials said. With a company like Prospect that owns multiple facilities, a bankruptcy case could take years.

Connecticut also requires a certificate of need for cessation of health care services, such as the closure of an emergency room or labor and delivery unit, though some facilities have halted services before receiving approval from the state.

“Even though there is not a direct path to hospital receivership, the Connecticut Department of Public Health works with its partner state agencies ... to monitor our health care systems. DPH also seeks counsel from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as well as input from the Connecticut Hospital Association in these situations,” said Chris Boyle, a spokesman for the health department.

“DPH retains regulatory enforcement authority over hospitals even when such hospitals are subject to court oversight, for example in bankruptcy. DPH’s regulatory authority focuses on ensuring that hospitals comply with state and federal health care quality and safety laws, including the conditions of participation for Medicare and Medicaid.

Kumar Hyde said that, as of now, some Prospect hospitals in Connecticut have “healthy” profit margins. “A review of the data provided to OHS by Manchester and Waterbury hospitals demonstrates that both hospitals have reported healthy profit margins in the recent past, as well as a steady number of hospital discharges over the last five years,” she said. “Audited financial statements through fiscal year 2022 (the most recent) show mostly positive margins for both facilities over the last five years.”

Prospect suffered a devastating cyberattack across its facilities in August, however, and hospital executives told state leaders that the data breach set them back financially. Prospect and other health systems are expected to file financial statements for the 2023 fiscal year in the coming weeks.

“As the Prospect hospitals have worked to recover from last year’s cyberattack, DPH continues to monitor health and safety in their facilities,” Kumar Hyde said. “The state considers all possibilities for addressing potential challenges that could arise from any disruptions to the health care system, such as any potential hospital bankruptcy.”

Hospital finances a growing concern

Although Connecticut has some safeguards in place, several officials say more should be done as concerns mount over the financial state of hospitals.

Senate President Pro Tem Martin Looney has recommended the Public Health Committee draft a bill that would require for-profit hospitals to place in escrow one year’s worth of operating expenses, “to make sure patients and the state are protected.”

That could mean setting aside \$100 million or more, depending on the health care system, he said.

“I would certainly also support a receivership process. Those hospitals are critical providers of service in the communities where they’re located, and there’s a great deal of alarm about what might happen,” said Looney, D-New Haven. “I worry about the delivery of services to people who live in those regions of the state. There’s a huge concern about access and convenient travel distances. All those things come into play if the hospitals’ operations might be in jeopardy.”

Massachusetts recently considered a bill that would create a path for state receivership of hospitals and free-standing clinics that provide “essential health services” and are slated for closure.

Sen. Saud Anwar, co-chair of the Public Health Committee, said he plans to incorporate into a bill the requirement for for-profit hospitals to put funds in an escrow account.

“I think we have to address some of these weaknesses in our policies,” he said.

Any proposal to create a path for hospital receivership would be reviewed carefully by the health committee, he said. But he worries receivership would be too costly and complex for the state.

“The idea is to protect the hospitals and the well-being of the patients from people who are trying to make blatant profits from patient care,” Anwar said. “If the state is managing them, it’s going to be very difficult. The state does not have the infrastructure to manage some of these facilities. It can definitely regulate and have protections and identify areas to manage, but to take over the entire hospital and run it, it’s going to be very complex.”

A spokeswoman for Lamont said the governor has not proposed modifying the state’s receivership laws but is concerned about the state of hospital finances.

In his proposed budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1, Lamont has recommended adding a new position to the Office of Health Strategy that would support expanded financial monitoring of hospitals, “to develop advanced warning of financial distress” and to strengthen Connecticut’s certificate of need review process.

“As the governor illustrated with his legislative proposal to strengthen the state’s financial oversight of hospitals, he believes the state needs to have more timely information and authority over major transactions in the health care industry,” said Julia Bergman, Lamont’s spokeswoman. “With respect to Prospect, the office continues to be in touch with all of the parties, and the Department of Public Health continues to ensure patient care is maintained. Prospect has a legal obligation to provide care at the hospitals it owns until ownership is transferred.”

Negotiations between Yale New Haven Health and Prospect Medical are ongoing, and the deal is awaiting state approval.

Health officials have also recommended strengthening Connecticut’s certificate of need policies to ensure better enforcement and more timely decisions. The state requires a certificate of need for closures, expansions and other changes to health care facilities.

The Connecticut Hospital Association said it is open to conversations about new ways to support patients and health care access and “would be interested” in seeing language on a proposal requiring for-profit hospitals to set aside operating expenses.

But the agency urged the state to bolster its certificate of need process.

“At its core, receivership is a reactive measure used in a crisis. While [we are] open to conversations related to what authorities [think] would be helpful in preserving patient care and protecting jobs during a time of crisis, energy would be far better spent actually preventing the crisis in the first place,” said Paul Kidwell, senior vice president of policy for the association.

“If used correctly, the state’s certificate of need process is a tool to prevent crisis. Unfortunately, inefficient administration of the CON process has resulted in significant delays that have put in jeopardy access to health services for patients in our state. CHA’s first priority is ensuring that the information and tools at hand are used to prevent a crisis.”

Deidre Gifford, director of the Office of Health Strategy, declined to comment on a potential change in receivership laws.

“It may be there are additional steps the state could take, but I think we need to see specific proposals and comment on them once they’re before us,” she said.

The new hospital financial oversight position proposed by the governor would help the state “get more frequent reporting from hospitals on certain key indicators of financial health” that go beyond the annual reports the state currently receives, Gifford said.

“It’s a matter of frequency. But also, we’re proposing to get things like accounts that are more than 90 days past due, and to get that reporting on a quarterly basis; days cash on hand, to get that on a quarterly basis — things that might be indicators of financial distress at a hospital.”

## **CT Mirror**

### *A cellphone use ban in schools? One CT town is experimenting*

Gov. Ned Lamont’s suggestion last month towards the end of his annual State of the State address that kids lock away their smartphones during the school day unexpectedly generated a wave of applause that still is resonating.

“I’m getting a lot of feedback, more feedback on this than anything I’ve done in a while,” Lamont said Tuesday on a school tour. “And I think it really has hit a chord with parents and teachers, and the kids are OK with it.”

Lamont, Attorney General William Tong and education Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker visited Illing Middle School in Manchester, where school administrators are three months into a smartphone experiment begun before Lamont mused that schools might do well to emulate Beyoncé.

The singer is one of the performing artists who sometimes require phones be locked in Yondr pouches, small neoprene bags that allow patrons to keep their phones but not use them to take calls or make recordings or photographs during performances.

Manchester spent about \$30,000 on Yondr pouches, which can be quickly sealed in the morning and opened in the afternoon with magnetic locks, to enforce a ban at Illing on the use of smartphones during the school day.

It’s a pilot program that teachers and students say is producing benefits beyond a greater degree of engagement in class. They say there is less drama, fewer incidents of digital bullying and a restoration of the privacy that eroded when every kid carried a device that could record video and audio.

No longer are there viral moments at Illing.

“Before this, you’d have kids racing down the hall with their cameras out to video a fight,” said John Burkhardt, a teacher.

Patrick Regan, a science teacher, said the idea that you might be recorded covertly during the school day was discomfiting to students and staff.

“I think that the Yondr pouches give the students an opportunity to be themselves without having that fear of that getting posted on social media,” Regan said.

“Do you miss your phone?” Lamont asked Mikayla Morrison, a student.

“No, not really,” she replied.

Raymond Dolphin, the assistant principal, said some students objected initially, collecting signatures for a protest petition.

“Are you getting any pushback from parents?” Tong asked.

“We did have parents who were concerned about being able to get in touch with their children in the event that there’s a security issue,” said Chris Pattacini, the chair of the Board of Education.

Matt Geary, the school superintendent, said the concerns largely passed, and the administration will evaluate the experiment for possible expansion at the end of the school year.

Kate Dias, a math teacher at Manchester High School before becoming president of the Connecticut Education Association in 2021, said teachers have long struggled to compete with smartphones for students’ attention.

Many would place them in “cell phone jail,” confiscating them during classes.

“This is a much nicer way to manage that,” Dias said. Nodding to students, she added, “Gives you guys a little bit of control over it as well.”

“Why is this better than phone jail?” Tong asked.

Regan said it ended the constant need for supervision over who was taking notes or texting.

A new report found that CT could soon lose much of its \_\_\_ business as jobs and capital decline. Do you know the answer? Play this week's news quiz to find out.

“I don’t want to play whack a mole in my classroom,” Regan replied.

One month ago, Lamont twice mentioned Yondr during a not-quite-60-second section of a 33-minute speech in which he acknowledged Tong’s concerns about the corrosive and occasionally dangerous aspects of social media.

“Here is my idea, a little bit from China and a little bit from Beyoncé. China limits TikTok for children to one hour a day, and Beyoncé makes you leave your smartphone in a Yondr pouch before certain major events,” Lamont said. “We will be sending out guidance to your school board: Have your younger students leave their smartphones at home or drop them in a Yondr pouch at the start of every school day.”

In a year when the governor is intent on not increasing spending, the phone issue was one Lamont could embrace without a cost.

“There are a lot of good things you can do that don’t necessarily have to cost an awful lot of money,” Lamont said Tuesday. “This is one of them, I think.”

Lamont’s Yondr shoutout was heard by Graham Dugoni, a former Duke soccer player who founded Yondr in 2014 as a 33-year-old entrepreneur in California.

“He came to my office in 72 hours,” Lamont said. “His phone was ringing off the hook.”

Dugoni could not be reached Tuesday, but a company spokeswoman said Yondr pouches were used in 3,000 schools with one million students worldwide and the number is expected to “grow significantly” in the next academic year.

### *CT elder care bill gets mixed support from advocates, officials*

that would overhaul aspects of the state’s elder care sector, including more oversight of home care workers and swifter access to Medicaid, though a section transferring investigations of nursing homes from the public health department to the social services department became a flashpoint.

The measure, introduced by House Speaker Matthew Ritter and leaders of the Aging Committee, would make several changes to Connecticut’s sprawling home care industry, including creating an online registry of employees, requiring companies to send clients photo identification of workers, launching a presumptive eligibility program for people who need to access Medicaid quickly and want care at home, and expanding the long-term care ombudsman’s office.

There is also a controversial provision to move nursing home oversight and investigations from the state’s health department to the social services department. Licensure of facilities would remain with the health department.

Commissioners from both offices opposed the change.

“This proposal would create more problems and more delays rather than solve the ones we have,” said Dr. Manisha Juthani, the state’s public health commissioner.

“You cannot extricate complaint investigations from the body of work [at the health department], especially when you have a staff that require six months of training. That training is done by experienced staff within DPH who are already doing this type of survey work and complaint work, which is intertwined.

The social services department “does not have the management expertise and staff to supervise and oversee this group of people that has been specially trained to do this type of work.”

Juthani said the state receives about \$10 million from the federal government that could be in jeopardy if investigative responsibilities are removed from DPH.

Andrea Barton Reeves, commissioner of social services, also spoke out against the shift.

“We support keeping the complaints and oversight at the Department of Public Health and leaving DSS to the work that we do well,” she said. The social services department handles Medicaid payments to nursing homes, which covers more than 70% of nursing home care in Connecticut.

Aging Committee members questioned Juthani about a backlog in inspections related to nursing home complaints. The commissioner acknowledged her department had a backlog of about 2,000 complaint inspections but said serious complaints, such as abuse and neglect, continue to be prioritized.

The department is still recovering from the pandemic, when survey inspections were delayed, and from employee turnover that at one point caused surveyor staff to drop by 40%, she said. The department has been “aggressively recruiting” people, she said, and the vacancy rate recently fell to 14%.

But the number of complaints has also increased in recent years.

“Every day we go and do more [complaint investigations], but we also get 75 complaints every month. So, we get ahead, but then we also get more,” Juthani said.

Sen. Lisa Seminara, R-Avon, expressed alarm at the volume of nursing home complaints each month.

“It is concerning to me that we are still receiving 75 complaints, on average, per month,” she said. “Not only do we have a backlog that we have to address, but obviously things are not working correctly. Otherwise, your department would not be getting 75 complaints a month.”

Juthani said the high number of complaints points to the need for reform in the sector, including the changes proposed in Ritter’s bill and another wide-ranging proposal introduced by Gov. Ned Lamont that takes aim primarily at nursing home operations.

Home care agency leaders expressed support for the bill Tuesday, though some raised concerns about unintended consequences.

Marlene Chickerella, chairwoman of the Home Care Association of America Connecticut chapter, said she is in favor of home care workers wearing photo identification but called a requirement to send clients an employee’s picture 24 hours before an appointment “onerous” and “impractical.”

“Our members make every effort to be transparent and try to prevent identity theft while protecting the safety of caregivers and clients,” she said. “However, the one-day notice requirement to send a photo to the client is unreasonable ... given the nature of the home care industry, particularly if a caregiver needs to be placed immediately in the home. Clients typically call home care agencies to add visits on the same day or next day.”

Chickerella said she does not oppose the registry of home care workers for clients in Medicaid programs, but she questioned who would pay for it and how it would be maintained.

“The current Medicaid program registry of home care workers is often out of date,” she noted.

Clients have reported receiving paper binders with workers’ names that are not updated. The state has proposed an online registry that would be managed through the social services department.

Tracy Wodatch, president and CEO of the Connecticut Association for Health Care at Home, said she favors sections of the bill that deal with presumptive eligibility for Medicaid and expansion of fingerprinting locations for workers undergoing background checks.

But she shared concerns about the worker registry only being available to people receiving Medicaid, when “many [services] are paid by other insurances as well as privately.”

“Once again, we caution the legislature that our agencies have been providing these home-based services with flat Medicaid rates year after year,” she said.

Wodatch also worried about how agencies would comply with the requirement to send clients photo identification of workers in advance.

“Many agencies will need to invest in technology solutions to sufficiently comply, so additional funding will be needed,” she said. “Furthermore, there are logistical concerns about compliance. Notifying a client of a change

in scheduled staff already occurs, but sending a photo for said change at least 24 hours prior to a scheduled visit would be an administrative nightmare. I could cite many examples of last-minute changes that would not be able to meet this suggested mandate.”

The bill would also provide greater transparency of nursing home care and operations by requiring the state to contract with a firm specializing in data analysis and reviewing data “to determine if skilled nursing facilities are staffing to the acuity needs” of residents. The health and social services departments would have to post prominently on their websites tools for comparing the quality of nursing homes.

Mag Morelli, president of LeadingAge Connecticut, which represents 35 nonprofit nursing homes, said she backs the effort for increased transparency.

“While there is a plethora of nursing home information available to the public, it is not always easy to access,” she said. “Consumers are often faced with the challenge of choosing a nursing home under sudden and difficult circumstances. This effort to make the process easier is worthy of support.”

Morelli expressed similar concerns about home care agencies sending workers’ pictures in advance.

“While understanding the desire to let the consumer know in advance who will provide care in their home, we suggest more thought be given to situations in which the client is unable to receive the prior identification in a timely manner due to unforeseen circumstances,” she said.

Several advocates and nursing home residents praised the bill.

John Balisciano, president of the resident council at Apple Rehab Hewitt in Shelton, said the measure is vital for improving quality of care and giving people in nursing facilities a stronger voice — especially the plan to expand the ombudsman’s office.

“With enough staff, the program can continue to assist us not only individually but also in a collective effort to influence systemic changes,” he said. “This expansion ensures that every resident has support they need to raise their voice and that we all can continue to benefit from the advocacy and guidance the ombudsman program provides.”

The measure would authorize four additional positions for the long-term care ombudsman’s office — two for facility settings like nursing homes and two for the community ombudsman program that would serve the home care population. It would set aside \$20,000 for a new data system to support the community program.

Mairead Painter, the state’s long-term care ombudsman, said the measure “introduces critical reforms” to improve quality of life in nursing homes and home care services.

“This legislation represents a significant step forward in ensuring that our most vulnerable citizens receive the care and respect they deserve,” she said.

Sen. Kevin Kelly, R-Stratford, an elder law attorney, said he would work with his colleagues in the legislature to ensure the bill’s advancement.

“Aging is not a Republican or a Democratic issue, it’s a human issue,” he said. “Overwhelmingly, people want to age in place at home and not go into a nursing home, and this bill would not only help people do that but also expands the oversight into home health care.”

## *Wide-ranging CT affordable housing bill sparks familiar arguments*

Housing Committee members heard familiar arguments Tuesday on a wide-ranging bill that aims to increase affordable housing supply in Connecticut. While opponents argued for local control and less density, advocates spoke about a need to alleviate the fallout from the affordable housing crisis.

Senate Bill 6, the Senate Democrats' priority bill on housing this session, would also allow housing authorities to build in other towns, give more money to the homelessness response system and add funding to the state's Rental Assistance Program.

Advocates of the bill spoke to a dire need for more affordable housing. People are struggling to find a place to live, they said, and it's difficult for people with low incomes to live in many communities in the state. Some also said it's hard for employers to hire people because there isn't enough housing for staff.

"We're never going to solve homelessness until we create more housing," said Kara Capone, chief executive officer at Community Housing Advocates. "... What we have right now is a supply and demand issue. There's simply not enough supply to go around. There certainly isn't enough affordable supply to go around."

Opponents argued that expanding housing authorities' jurisdictions beyond the town they're located in would dilute local control and asked that the state make changes to Connecticut's housing choice voucher program instead. Some said they didn't want to see more density in their towns, while others said they were concerned about environmental issues.

"We have to have respect for people who came to Connecticut for a particular way of life," said Barry Michelson, with the Stamford Neighborhoods Coalition. "Yes, we will always need a housing safety net. But there has to be some respect for the folks who live here, who pay the bills, who pay the taxes here."

Connecticut lacks about 92,500 units of housing that are affordable and available for its lowest income renters. Thousands pay more than a third of their income to rent, and homelessness is rising. Lack of housing affordability disproportionately affects people of color.

"The quantity and affordability of housing is not a standalone problem," said Senate Majority Leader Sen. Bob Duff, D-Norwalk. "Rather, it is interconnected with education, health and safety. Without a roof over their heads, students will face a greater difficulty focusing on school. Families will be more susceptible to illness. Children and adults will never know the true safety and stability. It is thus imperative that we address the lack of housing in general in this state, and more specifically, the lack of affordable housing."

The committee also heard testimony from many who asked that it pass a bill to study 8-30g, a decades-old law that offers certain court remedies to developers whose proposals for affordable housing are denied.

Those who spoke in favor of the bill said the law hasn't worked as intended. It allows developers to appeal when local zoning commissions deny housing proposals and shifts the burden of proof to the municipality to prove that they denied the proposal for health or safety reasons. Towns are exempt from the law when 10% of their housing is designated affordable.

It also offers tax credits to help turn commercial properties into residential, one of the topics discussed last year during a roundtable group meeting. Converting commercial properties into residential has been discussed more nationally as more people work from home since the pandemic.

It also would reduce certain taxes for real property purchased to develop affordable housing.

The bill would also allocate an additional \$20 million to homelessness services, and an additional \$25 million for the Rental Assistance Program.

The homelessness response system has been strained as homelessness increases and people stay longer in shelters. The system has less turnover as it grows increasingly difficult for people to find housing.

Advocates have also said they're concerned the Department of Housing's Rental Assistance Program, which covers a portion of low-income tenants' rents, won't be able to have as many people in the program as rents rise and vouchers get more expensive.

Thousands of people who qualify for the program are also on waitlists and don't have access to a housing voucher.

But Gov. Ned Lamont's administration has set strict fiscal guardrails to limit spending. He's said it improves the financial health of the state, while advocates say it means people don't have all the services they need.

## Politics

Housing advocates largely spoke in favor of S.B. 6, saying it would help create the housing the state desperately needs.

"This proposal for a Housing Growth Fund is intended to reward municipalities playing a meaningful role in generating the housing needed to meet the state's affordable housing crisis with access to a \$50 million municipal support fund," Erin Boggs, executive director for the Open Communities Alliance, wrote in public testimony. "This type of state support for municipalities that are being true partners sends a clear message to municipalities that support for the overall needs of the state will be rewarded."

Leaders from some larger cities that have the bulk of the state's designated affordable housing also supported the bill.

"We believe in this incentive-based approach because we know that municipalities face unique circumstances and value the ability to make community-based decisions," wrote Karen Dubois-Walton, president of New Haven's Elm City Communities, in her public testimony. "This approach will provide municipalities with the flexibility to decide if and how they want to contribute to this shared issue and will reward the municipalities that choose to do so."

But many from suburban and rural areas of the state spoke against parts of the proposal, particularly the measure that would allow housing authorities to build in towns other than their own.

This would essentially mean the housing authorities would serve as developers, and advocates said would help offer more affordable housing so people have access to more communities. But opponents said it weakens local control.

"This is an approach the state has not used — and should not use," wrote Francis Pickering, executive director at the Western Council of Governments. "Enabling municipal departments and agencies to expand beyond the body politic that governs and funds them, without the mutual agreement of the communities they are expanding into, is a recipe for loss of accountability, service duplication, and conflict."

WestCOG supports or is neutral to the rest of the bill, Pickering's testimony said.

CT 169 Strong, a group that has opposed measures before the Housing Committee in the past, sent an email describing some of their objections to S.B. 6. The group said they want to see more focus on an ability to move

housing vouchers from town to town, and noted that the towns likely to get the most from the housing growth fund already have state and federal resources, among other concerns.

“When most of these cities already receive almost all of the grants, 9% LIHTC, state loans for affordable development, and almost all of the voucher allocations, why do they need yet another funding source to deny others in the state from creating affordable housing?,” they wrote in their email.

Republican lawmakers and some members of the group also spoke in favor of House Bill 5333, which proposes a study on how 8-30g court remedies affect municipalities. A similar bill was proposed in 2022, and housing advocates said it was a veiled attack on the decades-old law.

Maria Weingarten, one of the 169Strong founders, said it’s hard for towns such as New Canaan to reach the 10% mark that would exempt them from 8-30g because they don’t get as many resources, such as housing vouchers.

“I think we need to have a more comprehensive look at how the vouchers are allocated and also the portability of these vouchers and maybe consider making these vouchers centralized through a state housing authority so that there’s one waitlist so that everybody’s on that one list,” Weingarten said.

Municipalities are subject to certain federal restrictions on how and where vouchers can be used.

Housing attorney Rafie Podolsky said during Tuesday’s hearing that the 8-30g law is working as intended and has led to many new housing developments in the state.

“It has been an extremely beneficial statute in our judgment,” he said.

## **CT Hearst**

### *After years of struggles with job growth, can Connecticut’s economy get its ‘mojo’ back?*

In March 2008, the number of jobs on businesses’ payrolls in Connecticut reached a total of 1.72 million. The state had never had that many positions — and it has never had as many since then.

Today, Connecticut’s economy still has not fully recovered from the Great Recession. It is one of only four states — alongside West Virginia, Wyoming and Vermont — that had fewer jobs at the end of 2023 than in March 2008, according to data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Those three other states’ struggles with jobs growth in the past generation are not shocking. For sparsely populated states, it is more challenging to keep residents and recruit newcomers. The lack of people then becomes an impediment to creating jobs and overall economic growth.

For Connecticut, the reasons for its struggles with job growth are more complex. Like many rural states, it has seen low population growth in the past decade and a half. During the same period, some of its cornerstone industries have faced hard times. Connecticut has also continually grappled with a high cost of living and doing business.

Yet the Nutmeg State’s economic prognosis is not hopeless. Ironically, amid the upheaval unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the state has grown stronger in many ways. It appears to be finally gaining a significant number of new residents, many businesses are launching in or expanding to the state, and the state government’s finances are healthier than a decade ago. But the state will have to undergo further changes — including more progress on upgrading infrastructure and tackling the cost of living and doing business — if it is to truly put the Great Recession behind it and fulfill its economic potential.

“This is a state that is blessed with enormous advantages. But as things began to change, we were not quite up to speed. We were comfortable with the status quo,” Joe McGee, who served as the state’s economic development commissioner in the early 1990s, said in an interview. “Connecticut needs to be bolder. It needs to really take some risks and say to itself, ‘We want to play on a national stage.’”

### Big job losses in key industries

The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath hit Connecticut hard. During a state recession from March 2008 to January 2010, Connecticut shed approximately 120,000 payroll jobs — or about 7 percent of its total at the beginning of the downturn, according to data from the state Department of Labor. In January 2011, a year after Connecticut's recession ended, the state’s unemployment rate was running at 9.2 percent, compared with 4.9 percent in January 2008.

Some of the state’s largest industries particularly struggled. In December 2023, there was an estimated total of 113,600 jobs in financial activities in Connecticut, down 21 percent from nearly 145,000 in March 2008, according to the Department of Labor.

“We were heavily weighted in financial services,” Christopher Ball, an associate professor of economics at Quinnipiac University, said in an interview. “Financial services blew up in 2008, and, as a result, it disproportionately affected Connecticut.”

Employment in another of Connecticut’s crucial sectors, manufacturing, has also contracted since the Great Recession. The sector accounted for an estimated total of 158,400 jobs in December 2023, down 15 percent from March 2008.

Manufacturing job levels in Connecticut had started to decline much earlier, in the early 1990s. The trend was driven by automation and companies moving operations to lower-cost states and countries.

Overall, jobs growth in Connecticut was sputtering long before the Great Recession. The all-time jobs high that the state reached in March 2008 was only 4 percent higher than its total in March 1990. In comparison, Massachusetts' jobs tally in March 2008 was about 10 percent higher than in March 1990.

“From a longer-term perspective, Connecticut's economy is struggling,” Fred Carstensen, a professor of economics and finance at the University of Connecticut, said in an email. “Its performance... since 2008 is dismal. Its job creation since 1989, in 35 years, may be the worst in the nation. This is where the conversation should start.”

There were other factors that made Connecticut vulnerable to an economic crisis such as the Great Recession. While the state had long relied on sectors such as financial and insurance services and manufacturing — which have contributed to it perennially ranking as one of the wealthiest states, on a per capita basis — it had proved less adept at fostering emerging industries that would have helped diversify its economy.

“In the ‘90s, our universities really were not geared towards commercialization of research,” McGee said. “We were not seeing, as you’d see in California or Boston, this enormous amount of commercial development springing out of university research. With the new areas of growth in the economy, we didn’t have the support structure for that growth.”

### A difficult decade

After the Great Recession struck, Connecticut’s elected officials were not idle. The administration of Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, a Democrat who served two terms from 2011 to 2019, launched a number of programs, including First

Five Plus and Small Business Express, that distributed hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, tax credits and grants that were based on businesses retaining or creating jobs.

Those incentives had mixed results. They encouraged many businesses to stay in Connecticut, and they persuaded several large companies to expand or relocate to the state. But some of the recipients still ended up making significant job cuts in subsequent years.

The state also invested heavily in some up-and-coming industries, including the distribution of hundreds of millions of dollars to the bioscience community. But it could take decades for those incentives to have a large impact on economic growth.

“All those incentive programs certainly had some benefits. But they were programs that were very specific in nature. And we weren’t making holistic, structural changes to the affordability of Connecticut for our businesses,” Chris DiPentima, CEO and president of the Connecticut Business & Industry Association, said in an interview. “That’s one reason why we haven’t seen the job growth back to where we were in 2008.”

The incentives’ impact was also limited because of the state government’s fiscal travails. In 2009, 2011 and 2015, the General Assembly passed tax increases, driven by escalating spending on state workers’ retirement benefits and debt servicing. During that period, the state also faced several budget deficits.

“Over the course of my administration, we’ve had to pay the bills of other administrations, and that continues to drive our expenditures,” Malloy told reporters in 2016, according to a CT Mirror report. “I don’t believe people understand that a lack of paying the bills as they should have been paid (in previous decades) has led to the current difficulties the state of Connecticut is living with.”

In large part because of its shaky finances, Connecticut developed a national reputation for having a hostile business climate. In CNBC’s annual Top States for Business study, Connecticut consistently languished among the bottom 20 states in the 2010s.

“In my opinion, the state became inhospitable to businesses. And it damaged our reputation,” state Rep. David Rutigliano, R-Trumbull, said in an interview. He is also a partner in SBC Restaurant Group, which owns several restaurants across the state. “If you think about what the rest of the country was saying about Connecticut, instead of, ‘Wow, what a beautiful state, it’s got a lot of entertainment, and it’s close to New York and Boston,’ we were sitting here saying things like, ‘There’s yet another tax increase.’”

Battling a pandemic, charting a recovery

By the time COVID-19 spread to Connecticut in early 2020, the state still had not recovered all the jobs that it had lost during the Great Recession.

Given the state’s struggles in the 2010s, a global pandemic ostensibly would have delivered a crushing economic blow. Indeed, the first few months of the pandemic were grim. The state sustained a record-breaking loss of nearly 290,000 jobs during the spring of 2020, as much of the economy temporarily shut down.

Many businesses, including numerous restaurants, went out of business during the first year of the pandemic. But even more survived. Those that made it were buoyed by their own determination and resourcefulness, while they also benefited from a number of state, federal and nonprofit relief programs.

“The way Gov. (Ned) Lamont’s administration addressed this pandemic was by engaging people in the trenches — working with first responders, working with businesses that employ first-line workers and then engaging organizations that work with those small businesses,” Fran Pastore, founder and CEO of the Women’s Business Development Council, one of the state government’s leading nonprofit partners during the pandemic, said in an interview.

As Connecticut's economy has recovered in the past few years from the pandemic, much of the gloom that hovered over the state in the 2010s has lifted. In the corporate sector, there have been some significant setbacks, such as the announcement in January 2023 that toy maker Lego would move its U.S. headquarters from Enfield to Boston. But there has been a greater number of announcements of companies relocating or expanding to Connecticut. The largest of the newcomers is tobacco producer Philip Morris International, a Fortune 500 company that opened a new headquarters in Stamford in 2022, after moving from Manhattan.

At the same time, much of the anxiety about the state government's finances has subsided. The stabilizing factors include "fiscal guardrails" approved by the state legislature in 2017 and an infusion of federal stimulus funds during the pandemic. Consequently, Connecticut has recorded a series of budget surpluses in the past few years, paving the way for large tax cuts.

Lamont, a Democrat who gained prominence as a cable TV entrepreneur before he entered politics, frequently cites the state's improving finances as part of his efforts to cultivate more optimism in the business community. In speeches across the state during the past few years, he has continually argued that Connecticut can rediscover the economic vibrancy that it enjoyed in earlier generations.

"What we're trying to do in the state is help people start up businesses," Lamont said during a speech at the Stamford Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting in September. "This used to be the most entrepreneurial state in the country. We're getting our mojo back."

The tens of thousands of businesses that have been launched in the state in the past four years represent one sign of a resurgent "mojo."

"I found out that there was no company in Bridgeport doing what I was doing. That helps me market my company as the only company doing this type of work in Bridgeport," Darwin Lara, who started working full time in 2020 on his IT-services startup, Evocorp, said in an interview. "I could be anywhere in the world, but I chose Bridgeport."

Overall, Connecticut's jobs recovery since the beginning of the pandemic has been slow, but steady. Last October, the state's jobs total reached 1.698 million, surpassing the total of February 2020, which was the last month before the state recorded a COVID case. The state finished 2023 with an estimated total of 1.696 million jobs, after losing 2,500 positions last December, according to preliminary Department of Labor data. To surpass its all-time employment peak of 1.72 million by the end of 2024, the state will need to add about 25,000 jobs, or about 2,100 positions per month.

The other northeastern states have recovered at varying rates. At the end of 2023, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont still had fewer jobs than they did in February 2020. Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, respectively, surpassed their February 2020 job tallies in July 2022, March 2023, September 2022, April 2022 and January 2023.

The U.S., as a whole, took until June 2022 to fully recover from its pandemic job losses.

"There's energy and optimism about Connecticut's economy — where it is today, where it's come from and where it can go," DiPentima said. "But there's more work to be done. I think the governor clearly recognizes there's more work to be done."

The Connecticut of the future

Now that it has recovered nearly all of the jobs lost at the beginning of the pandemic, Connecticut has reached an economic crossroads. It could settle for more plodding growth that entails few sweeping changes — in which case, it would keep living up to its nickname as “the land of steady habits.” Or it could pursue a more ambitious path in which it tackles longstanding problems.

“The focus, now that the fiscal house is in order, should be how to restore economic vitality, competitiveness and growth,” said UConn’s Carstensen. “The governor and legislature should, must prioritize growth.”

There is bipartisan agreement that infrastructure investments can catalyze economic growth. During Malloy’s time as governor, the marquee projects included the launch of a rail line between Hartford and Springfield, Mass., and the CTfastrak express-bus system in the Hartford area. There were also a number of mass-transit improvements in southwestern Connecticut.

Lamont has carried on the work to improve Connecticut’s roads and rail lines, with many of those projects receiving substantial federal funding. Key initiatives include the \$1 billion replacement of the Walk Bridge in Norwalk. But the state is still playing catch-up, after making inadequate investments in previous generations. In Top States’ infrastructure category last year, the state ranked No. 33, with a grade of C-.

“Investing in higher-speed commuter rail is critical,” McGee said. “You can open up cheaper areas of Connecticut, outside Fairfield County, where people can live, and they can commute into Hartford, New Haven, Stamford or New York. When you look at (rail links between) European cities, Japanese cities or Chinese cities, we are so far behind.”

Better mass-transit systems that make it easier to live and work in Connecticut would help the state tackle another longstanding issue: its lack of population growth. Between 2010 and 2020, Connecticut’s population increased only about 1 percent, to approximately 3.6 million, according to Census Bureau data. In West Virginia, Wyoming and Vermont — the three other states that had fewer jobs at the end of 2023 than in March 2008 — the populations, respectively, dropped 3 percent, increased 2 percent and grew 3 percent during the same period. Nationwide, the population increased 7 percent.

But faster population growth is a tough sell in much of Connecticut. Many state residents believe that overdevelopment threatens their communities. Those residents worry that unchecked multifamily-housing development will lead to deleterious consequences such as more road congestion, strained school resources and environmental damage.

There are many others who are concerned about the state’s demographic trajectory. The limited supply of newcomers to the state and homegrown workers is arguably the greatest driver of the labor shortages that have emerged in sectors such as manufacturing in the past few years. At the same time, housing advocates assert that the slow population growth highlights the difficulty that many people face in finding affordable accommodations in Connecticut. In Top States’ cost-of-living category last year, Connecticut ranked No. 34, with a grade of D+.

“Particularly since the Great Recession, Connecticut has not been growing, and it’s not been creating enough jobs. Those things are completely linked,” Pete Harrison, director of DesegregateCT, a program of the nonprofit Regional Plan Association, said in an interview. “There are plenty of people who would want to live in Connecticut, if they could afford to, if there was the housing supply for it. But our local municipalities and our state government are really not thinking about it that way and devolved so much power to local communities that don’t see that opportunity and don’t want to invest in that kind of growth.”

Housing affordability and availability have significantly affected the growth rates in the state’s five most-populous cities. Between 2010 and 2020, Stamford’s population expanded 10 percent, to about 135,000, the

second-highest residency in the state, after Bridgeport. Stamford's growth has been powered by the construction of thousands of apartments across the city, particularly in the downtown and the South End.

But the growth was much slower in other cities in the 2010s. In Bridgeport, the state's most-populous city, the population increased 3 percent, to about 149,000. In New Haven, the residency rose 3 percent, to about 134,000. Waterbury's population ticked up 4 percent, to about 114,000. Hartford's population declined 3 percent, to about 121,000.

"As people are coming in, people are going out — that might be why we don't see the numbers growing here in Bridgeport," state Sen. Marilyn Moore, D-Bridgeport, said in an interview. "They're coming in from other parts of lower Fairfield County, where it's more expensive. And people who are here and can't afford to stay here are moving to some place that they can afford."

With a larger supply of housing that is affordable, yet still high quality, Connecticut could attract a greater number of newcomers. Demonstrating this potential, the state recorded a net gain of about 57,000 residents in 2022, following an uptick of 10,000 in 2021, according to data from the Census Bureau. (There is, however, some skepticism among demographic experts about the reliability of the Census data for the past couple of years because it is based on surveys and has a significant margin of error.)

More people, particularly in the state's cities and larger towns, would catalyze greater economic growth. With an expanding economy, "you get tax-revenue growth, and as we've seen over the past couple of years with budget surpluses, that revenue growth can support more funding for education, more funding for child care, more funding for housing, more funding for nonprofits," said CBIA's DiPentima.

DiPentima added that, "economic growth and policies that support economic growth — although sometimes viewed as fiscally conservative — are the best ways to support some of the progressive social desires around spending, lift up Connecticut's residents and give every resident an opportunity at the American Dream."

This is the first in a multi-part series that looks at Connecticut's economy over the last decade-plus, the challenges the state faces and what is next.

## *CT election regulators want more oversight of local town and city political campaign finances*

Local political candidates including mayors, selectmen and school boards would be required to file their campaign finance statements electronically with the State Elections Enforcement Commission under legislation supported Monday by Connecticut's top election regulator.

Michael J. Brandi, executive director and general counsel of the SEEC, told the General Assembly's Government Administration & Elections Committee that the current system, in which candidates for local office file their reports in local city and town halls, is hard to monitor by the SEEC, the public and the news media.

The fully searchable online Campaign Reporting Information System known as eCris would take away the duty of local campaign filings from town clerk offices and make them readily available in the current repository to anyone, including SEEC investigators, Brandi said. "Currently, to research spending on candidates and referendums on the local level you must check not only the SEEC searchable electronic filing system for party and certain political committee spending, but also paper filings for all local candidates and local level political committees that are stored in 169 filing cabinets and are electronically inaccessible to the public," he said.

Brandi, acknowledging a staffing crunch at the SEEC, said the computer infrastructure is in place for the transition, and that the vast majority of Connecticut town clerks are eager to have the SEEC take charge of the filings. In 2017, a pilot project was developed at a cost of a million dollars. "With this proposal, it can be made

available to all filers at little cost," Brandi said. "Increased transparency with local elections will have real world benefits to the citizens and reporters who want to be informed about matters that impact them directly, from referenda on buildings and budgets, to school board elections. Effectively, now spending on such matters is buried. This would bring it into the light."

Time and effort in local town and city halls could be shifted over to the new requirements for early voting in the state, Brandi noted.

Sen. Rob Sampson of Wolcott, a top Republican on the GAE Committee, said he was concerned about the SEEC's ability to manage more candidate reporting and validating.

"We've already analyzed this on multiple levels," Brandi replied, stressing that most filings are very simple electronic inputs identical to the current system used for statewide office and General Assembly races, as well as political action committees. "We already have all the filings for all the town committees in the state of Connecticut. We believe that making it electronic, where people can access the system directly, with our oversight from our compliance unit, where we have attorneys and elections officers that are available to assist people in making those filings, it would be a seamless process to move it into our system."

"Compliance, to me, is the number one factor that concerns me more than anything," Sampson said. "I know you're overwhelmed already."

Brandi said the 35-member staff is currently split among compliance, enforcement, information technology and auditing. He conceded that two or three more staff members might be needed for the expanded electronic filings, and he expects to ask for them next year when a new two-year budget is proposed.

"Right now, at the municipal level, when there are questions that come up, they call us anyway," Brandi said. "But we're not getting the actual filings. The filings are buried in town clerk offices. It's a problem for the town clerks. They don't have the vault space. They don't have the manpower to look at these campaign finance filings. They're not being reviewed in any way at the municipal level."

In submitted testimony, Waterbury Town Clerk Antoinette Spinelli, and New Britain Town Clerk Mark Bernacki, representing the Connecticut Town Clerks Association, said the successful 2017 pilot had 24 municipalities that participated. "These towns, municipal candidates, their treasurers and the SEEC were pleased with the streamlining process in using the eCris recording system," they wrote. "Consolidating the campaign finance filing regulations with SEEC will eliminate the confusion in municipal election cycle years and will provide total clarity and efficiency for candidate treasurers to utilize the eCris system."

In a brief update on the SEEC's active investigation into the recent Bridgeport elections, Brandi said that four of the agency's five investigators are currently involved full-time in the probe. He said that in all, the SEEC is investigating more than 30 individual complaints in the Bridgeport mayoral campaigns.

"I have one person covering the rest of the state of Connecticut," he said. "We're dedicating maximum resources to the places where we believe we need to get answers quickly. But as you know, investigations are not quick. There is a lot of fieldwork that goes on."

*CT insurers would have to cover fertility treatments for singles and LGBTQ residents under bill*

Current health insurance coverage in Connecticut discriminates against singles and LGBTQ couples who have trouble getting pregnant, State Comptroller Sean Scanlon charged on Tuesday, stressing that fertility treatments can run into tens of thousands, to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Speaking in favor of pending legislation aimed at providing equal access to coverage for the treatment and diagnosis of infertility, Scanlon said the issue was illustrated to him last year by a same-sex couple who did not have coverage under state employee health plans, and faced major financial obstacles in seeking fertility treatment.

"I'm somebody who believes fundamentally that everybody in this state who wants to have a child should be able to do so regardless of who they love and who they want to have that child with," Scanlon said during more than a half hour of testimony during a public hearing on the proposed bill. He recalled receiving an email last year from a female state employee who complained that the plan discriminated against them. "They realized that plan simply did not comport with what they were experiencing as a same-sex couple trying to access fertility services."

Within two weeks, Scanlon said he changed state policy, but for the rest of Connecticut, many of those insured have to be declared "infertile" by medical professionals in order to be covered for the procedure. "More people in the state of Connecticut and all of the fully-issued plans in the state should access to the same ability to have a child, regardless of who they love," he said. If approved in committee then ratified in the House and Senate and signed into law by the governor, the law should adhere to guidelines provided by the American Society of Reproductive Medicine.

Noting last month's ruling by the Alabama Supreme Court that has cast a shadow over fertility treatments including in vitro fertilization, or IVF, Scanlon stressed the need for all insured residents to have the help available if they have trouble conceiving.

"I think we're seeing a world in which reproductive rights, and now even something like fertility are under attack in this country and I think it's more important than ever that Connecticut remain a leader in this space and remain a place that people feel that they can come and start a family with who they love regardless of who that person is," Scanlon said.

Of 20 pieces of written testimony submitted to the committee, including reproductive rights organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union, none opposed the bill. Conservative state Rep. Cara Pavalock-D'Amato of Bristol, a top Republican on the committee, asked advocates a number of questions.

"Infertility, whether you are straight or gay, up to this point has been a requirement," Pavalock-D'Amato said. "Now is it through this bill that we are no longer requiring people to be sick, they no longer have to be infertile?"

"That is the intent of it," Scanlon replied. "The problem that we were experiencing is that people on our plan were having to be deemed by a doctor to be infertile, and there was a period of time to which they had to have sexual intercourse that was not resulting in a pregnancy in order to meet that standard." Under that requirement, same sex partners and single women who wanted to start families would be ineligible for coverage, he said. "If they don't have the necessary gametes to attain pregnancy on their own or their same-sex partner, they would automatically qualify for fertility treatments under the state employee plan."

"If we're changing the definition for this elective procedure, why not others, as well?" Pavalock-D'Amato said.

"Yes, it is true that someone without insurance coverage could pay for this, but it's very, very expensive," Scanlon replied. "This is meant to level that playing field."

Pavalock-D'Amato asked Liz Gustafson, state director for Reproductive Equity Now, details on the Alabama court ruling. "They explained and described and defined an embryo as an extra-uterine child, which is really dangerous in paving the way for personhood laws that is not rooted in science and has been utilized by anti-abortion and anti-assisted reproduction extremists in effort to limit access to the full range of comprehensive reproductive health care," Gustafson said.

### *Opinion: How CT created an illusion of saving money*

The United States and the State of Connecticut are sinking deeper into debt. The skyrocketing national debt receives widespread media attention, Connecticut's almost none. Uncle Sam's growing debt is highlighted and explained by huge budget deficits, while Connecticut's increasing liabilities are hidden behind budget surpluses.

Yet, Connecticut's growing debt is also ignored, because it is caused mainly by overgenerous and underfunded state employee compensation. No one, certainly not union-friendly Democrats, wants to offend public sector unions by exposing this reality.

Actually, Democrats have employed active disinformation and willful indifference to misinform and uninform the public about the last two state labor contracts.

In 2022, Gov. Ned Lamont inked the SEBAC 2022 agreement, a four-year deal with three years of 4.5% annual pay boosts (combining wages and "annual increments"). Lamont is now negotiating the fourth year, which the agreement left "open." These raise accumulate to a robust 14% compound increase over just three years. That doesn't count \$3,500 in pensionable bonus payments nor separate pandemic pay averaging \$1,000 per employee in 2023.

When legislators approved SEBAC 2022, the Office of Fiscal Analysis estimated the future cost of the agreement, excluding the impact upon the state employee pension fund. OFA stated "The SERS impact will not be recognized until FY 24." There has been no official follow-up analysis of SEBAC 2022, even to assess its impact upon SERS.

Contrast this with the treatment of the SEBAC 2017 labor agreement negotiated by former Gov. Dannel Malloy. Malloy claimed that SEBAC 2017 would save the state \$24 billion over 20 years. He and Democrat legislators passed a law requiring the state comptroller to track the alleged savings on an annual basis over a decade. Every year, the comptroller prepares the "SEBAC 2017 Savings Report,"

Almost half (\$9.7 billion) of the "savings" were fictional wage concessions that state employees never made.

The fantasy relies upon the preposterous notion that state employees are entitled to raises every year, as if annual raises are the equivalent of a birthright. If employees do not get a raise, the raise they don't get is called a "saving."

So, who established the "raise they didn't get" in 2017? Malloy did. In his budget proposal, he proposed hundreds of millions of raises. Then, he negotiated a better bargain for a few years and called the difference "savings."

How do we know this? From the documentation that Malloy's Office of Policy and Management published in support of his claimed savings. Under a header of "Wage Estimates were developed by OPM" (not an independent source), it states "Elimination of potential FY 2017, 2018, and 2019 increases: Removes all of the proposed RSA increase in the Governor's recommended budget..." (Emphasis added.)

The raises that workers “didn’t get” were figments of Dan Malloy’s imagination — they were “potential,” “proposed” and “recommended.” There was no existing wage contract under which unionized state workers were legally entitled to raises that they gave up in negotiations with Malloy.

Malloy claimed these wage savings in the fiscal 2018-2019 budget — and over the next 18 years. That is how the fantasy number balloons to \$9.7 billion. Why not \$48.5 billion over the next century?

Malloy’s claim was ludicrous in the first place, but this exercise in make-believe has become embarrassing even to the state comptroller, who wrote in the recent report “In general, savings estimates of prior policy changes become more tenuous the more time passes ...”

It gets worse. Employees did agree to three years of wage freezes, but then they received two healthy 3.5% wage increases. In addition, most still received five years of “annual increments” (aka “step increases”) that average 2% per employee, and Malloy paid a \$2,000 bonus to those who did not receive “increments” and \$1,000 to those who did. Factoring in “increments” (but not bonuses), employees enjoyed three years of 2% annual increases and two of 5.5%. That accumulates to a compound 13.7% increase over the five-year period. Not bad.

The entire exercise involved sleight-of-hand where Malloy backloaded wage increases, so he could create the illusion of “savings” at the front end.

While SEBAC 2017 has been distorted by this elaborate exercise in disinformation, Lamont’s SEBAC 2022 deal has simply been ignored.

Except that the Nutmeg Research Institute chose not to ignore SEBAC 2022 and commissioned a study of it by The Townsend Group, which I head. We found that SEBAC 2022 increased the unfunded liability of the SERS pension fund by \$4.5 billion, or 11%, and that it has increased state labor costs to a current annual running rate of \$8.5 billion, a level \$836 million, or 11%, higher than costs in fiscal 2021 immediately before SEBAC 2022 took effect.

It is time for Lamont to impose a back-loaded wage and increment freeze in the fourth “open” year of SEBAC 2022. Otherwise, the Nutmeg State will fall even deeper in debt.

Red Jahncke is president of the Townsend Group, a business-consulting firm in Greenwich. His e-mail is [RTJahncke@Gmail.com](mailto:RTJahncke@Gmail.com)

# CT News Junkie

## *Committee Debates Expansion of Infertility Treatment Coverage*

Christine Stuart

March 5, 2024

Should Connecticut health insurance plans cover infertility treatment? The public weighed in Tuesday on a bill that would expand fertility treatment to single people and the LGBTQ+ community, who currently can't meet the definition of infertility.

The state employees plan was modified last September to include coverage for single people and members of the LGBTQ+ community who work for the state.

State Comptroller Sean Scanlon, who manages that plan of 250,000 lives, said "everybody in Connecticut should be able to have a child regardless of who they love, but what we know through science is that's not possible."

Rep. Cara Pavalock-D'Amato, R-Bristol, said she's confused about why a heterosexual couple would have to be deemed "infertile" to get coverage but an LGBTQ+ or a single person would not have to be. "Their fertility is not the reason they've not having a child," Scanlon said. "Their sexual identity is the reason they're not able to have the child."

While there's nothing in the law that prohibits a single person or an LGBTQ+ couple from getting fertility treatment, "it is very expensive," Scanlon said. He said requiring insurance coverage for any state-regulated plan would make it easier.

He said the simple premise behind the bill is leveling the playfield.

Pavalock-D'Amato said it seemed to be giving same-sex couples and single people the ability to access coverage more quickly because a heterosexual couple would be given six months to a year to have to prove they were unable to conceive.

And when it comes to a single individual, no individual has sperm and eggs, "that's just how it's made," she said. "Nobody's born with having sperm and eggs at the same time."

"We're calling it science, but really that's nature," Pavalock-D'Amato said.

She said that's why she's struggling with the language because there's "no infertility here."

Katherine Kraschel, an expert on the intersection of reproduction, gender, bioethics and health policy, with a particular concentration on fertility care and reproductive technologies, disagreed that there's any discrimination.

She said the bill would eliminate the current discrimination of any person without the gametes necessary to produce a child.

As far as coverage is concerned, she said it's her understanding that insurance wouldn't cover the cost of acquiring eggs or sperm, but would cover any analysis of those things and any treatments or labs required before treatment, which if it's IVF would require expensive drugs to build up a lot of eggs that would then be retrieved.

It does not currently cover the preservation of any embryos, eggs, or sperm. The cost of preservation is about \$1,000 per year regardless of the number.

Dr. Mark Leondres, who is a reproductive endocrinologist, said the bill will expand access to care by aligning the medical standard of care to include the LGBTQ+ and single community to the definition of infertility by the American Society of Reproductive Medicine.

"The desire to be a parent is something separate from gender identity of sexual orientation, it's just something that's kind of innate within our humanity," Leondres said.

He said most of the patients from the LGBTQ+ community don't have coverage unless they work for a major corporation, which offers insurance that covers it.

"I think it would be great if the state would be in line with what the major corporations in the United States are offering," Leondres said. "This bill would give patients access to care so they can build a family on their own terms."

Connecticut's largest business lobby testified against the bill because they said it would make health insurance more expensive for small employers.

Wyatt Bosworth, associate counsel with the Connecticut Business and Industry Association, said he's not talking about the merits of the mandate or whether this mandate deserves coverage. He said with the shrinking small-group insurance market, these mandates go through the health benefits review process where a cost-benefit analysis is done.

"With every new mandate, there are over 60 in state law right now. We are top three in the country when it comes to that. With every new mandate there's an increased cost to the policyholders," Bosworth said.

### ***FOI Advocates: Bill Exempting Witness Statements On Police Body Cameras Is 'Overly Broad'***

Coral Aponte  
March 5, 2024

Connecticut's Freedom of Information Commission and an open-records advocacy group say a bill to exempt from disclosure witness statements captured on police body cameras is written overly broad and could lead to the suppression of too much information.

The legislation – Senate Bill 234 – was proposed by the Department of Emergency Services & Public Protection. According to DESPP Commissioner Ronnell Higgins the bill was written to “align” the Freedom of Information Act with the new reality of officers’ body-worn camera footage.

Higgins and members of his staff told the Public Safety and Security Committee last week that police body-cameras are now commonly used by officers to collect sworn witness statements on video rather than in writing. Higgins reminded the committee that the 2020 Police Accountability Act mandated that law enforcement personnel use body-worn cameras while on duty.

“While FOIA already exempts signed witness statements from disclosure, those same statements are regularly captured on body camera recordings,” Higgins said. “This proposal would apply to witness statements whether signed or captured on paper or on a recorded video. In addition, also pursuant to the Police Accountability Act, changes in statute have also added additional records to the list of items exempted under the Freedom of Information Act. This proposal would bring that law and the Freedom of Information Act law into alignment.”

The Connecticut Police Chiefs Association (CPCA) also submitted testimony in support of the bill. However, according to Connecticut’s Freedom of Information Commission, the way the proposal is written “is broad and would open the door to the suppression of all information obtained from witnesses regardless of whether such information is contained within an official, sworn statement. It would allow the redaction of witness statements contained within police reports, or recorded by video or audio (e.g., 911 calls). Such a broad exemption would strike a critical blow to transparency in criminal investigations.”

The FOI Commission’s testimony said the language of the bill would need to be narrowed. Limiting access to information is also a concern for the Connecticut Council on Freedom of Information (CCFOI). The council’s mission is to enforce the FOI Act and ensures access to public documents. Michele Jacklin, legislative co-chair of the council, testified that she also believed the language of the bill was too broad in scope. Jacklin said the FOI Act already protects the identity of witnesses, leaving SB 234 as an unnecessary addition.

Jacklin also said the bill’s provisions on body-worn cameras runs afoul of the First Amendment. “It would seem that the objective of Section 2 is to prevent the news media from disseminating images or videos of an accident or crime scene that involves a minor, a victim of domestic or sexual abuse or a homicide or suicide victim” Jacklin wrote. “In our view, such a law would be unconstitutional.”

She cited the U.S. Supreme Court’s repeated rejections of prior restraint except in extremely narrow circumstances where the dissemination of information or images threatens national security. She said the protection was first established in *Near v. Minnesota* in 1931 and has been upheld numerous times, most notably in *New York Times Co. v. United States* in 1971.

“Government has no place in a newsroom, and using legislation to make editorial decisions is a dangerous precedent,” Jacklin wrote.

The Judicial Branch also voiced concern that SB 234 would have a negative impact on crime victims and their families. Specifically looking at Section 2 – the scene of an incident that could be constituted

as an unwarranted invasion of privacy of minors or victims on film or video – the branch’s statement says a visual image depicting “a scene of an incident” of a minor or victim can do more harm than good. By stating “scene of an incident,” the Judicial Branch said that the bill eliminates the protections in other locations where these records could be generated – meaning you could move the victim from the location and it would be warranted.

“We are pleased that the bill expands the types of victims receiving protection from FOI disclosure to include a minor, a victim of domestic or sexual abuse, a victim of suicide, or a deceased victim of an accident. However, the “scene of an incident” language has the reverse effect,” the Judicial Branch wrote. Russell Blair, Director of Education and Communications for the FOIC.

“A lot of departments have replaced signed witness statements with those recorded statements,” Blair said. “Our concern is that by removing the word ‘signed,’ you potentially open the door to the suppression of all kinds of different witness information, whether it comes from a 911 call, whether it’s witness information contained within a police report – the types of information that is routinely released and is revealing about criminal matters gives important information about what happened. How police determined what charges were applicable.”

Blair said that if the law enforcement wants to treat statements obtained via body-worn cameras as the equivalent of written statements, he said the commission suggest using narrower language that makes that more clear.”

## *Affordable Housing Statute Faces Increased Scrutiny*

HARTFORD, CT – A law passed more than 30 years ago to increase affordable housing across the state is increasingly coming under fire from those who claim it has failed to prevent the state’s current housing crisis.

The Housing Committee heard public testimony Tuesday on a bill that calls for the Housing Commissioner to conduct a study of the impacts of the 30-year-old law – known as 8-30g – and to determine if its revisions would create more affordable housing around the state.

Opponents of the bill fear it is a backdoor attempt to gut 8-30g’s affordable housing goals.

CT General Statute 8-30g, also known as the “Connecticut Affordable Housing Land Use Appeals Procedure,” was passed in 1989. The law sets a goal that 10% of the housing stock in any Connecticut municipality must qualify as “affordable housing.” In municipalities where that goal isn’t met, developers can submit an appeal to the state to override local zoning regulations to build high-density, multi-family housing or other large-scale housing developments.

In a study published earlier this year by the Office of Policy and Management, historic exclusionary zoning practices were found to be one of the major causes of the state’s racial and economic segregation.

The provision that allows contractors under 8-30g to circumvent local zoning ordinances has always been a contentious topic, with supporters and detractors hurling claims of racism and government overreach at each other. More recently, as the state’s lack of housing has reached crisis levels, those who wish to study 8-30g have pointed out that housing affordability has gotten worse during the time the statute has been on the books.

“The goal was noble, and being a student of housing, I understand that it was a blue ribbon panel that initiated [8-30g], and it was very well intentioned to address the questions of access, affordability, and equity. But I must say that nearly 40 years later, it has not met its goal,” said Sen. Tony Hwang, R-Fairfield, testifying in favor of the bill.

Sen. Ryan Fazio, R-Greenwich, testified about what he saw as the “adversarial” relationship that 8-30g has created between municipalities, developers, and the state and he offered some reforms.

“Over the last couple of years, I’ve introduced bipartisan legislation that would try to accomplish the goal of reforming 8-30g, increase local input, and reduce the cost of housing. [Some] of those proposals include rewarding towns for allowing more naturally occurring affordable housing, creating a maximum height for any building development under 8-30g, which is similar to what Massachusetts does, and to make 8-30g based on the total number of affordable units rather than a percentage of all existing housing stock.”

There is still strong support for 8-30g among the state’s housing advocates, and several of them made sure to let the committee know that the statute still has work to do in its current state.

“Section 8-30g is one of the state’s most important zoning laws and is a key statute in inducing towns to comply with their long-standing obligations under the state’s Zoning Enabling Act to ‘promote housing choice and economic diversity in housing, including housing for both low- and moderate-income households,’” said Sean Ghio, policy director for the Partnership for Strong Communities, in testimony submitted to the committee. “If you are concerned with reducing racial and economic segregation, closing the achievement gap, and improving access to good jobs, creating integrated communities with a diversity of housing choices with Section 8-30g is essential.”

Erin Boggs, executive director of Open Communities Alliance, agreed.

“This bill or something similar is proposed every year, generally advocated for by people who oppose adding affordable housing to their town and oppose the Affordable Housing Appeals Act, even though towns have had 30 years to plan and zone for greater affordability that would gain them a moratorium to or exemption from this law. There is no reason to further study 8-30g.”

Local residents took issue with the suggestion that race was a driving factor in their resistance to 8-30g. Dana Benson, a resident of the town of Easton, acknowledged the harmful impact that zoning has had on marginalized groups, but insisted that was not the motivation for wishing to change 8-30g now.

“While it may be true in some areas of the United States that local zoning was used to exclude groups, the truth is in Connecticut our rural towns have low-density zoning, and it was created to be low density because our towns, like Easton, rely on septic tanks and wells for their water. Our low density housing is designed to protect the water of our town, of which Bridgeport gets 90%.”

## *Home Care Workers Edge Closer to Wage Increase and Benefits*

Last year at this time, Connecticut’s home care workers were staging a die-in at the Legislative Office Building. But today they are one step closer to getting the wage increase and benefits for which they’ve been asking.

Gov. Ned Lamont said Tuesday that he reached a three-year deal with the home care workers, who are represented by SEIU District 1199 New England.

The deal, which will need to be ratified by the General Assembly, will increase wages from about \$17 per hour to \$23 per hour by the 2025-26 fiscal year.

The proposed package of wage and benefit enhancements reflects a commitment to meeting the needs of Connecticut's most vulnerable populations while promoting the preference for receiving care in one's own home and community.

“This historic agreement shows our commitment to address the worker shortages experienced by some of Connecticut's most vulnerable Medicaid participants through the creation of a package of wage and benefit enhancements that will support recruitment and retention in the home care workforce and ongoing education and training to promote quality service delivery,” Lamont said.

The agreement includes several provisions aimed at uplifting workers and enhancing the quality of care they provide:

**Historic Wage Increases:** PCAs will see a 26% wage increase over the three-year contract, with wages rising from the current rate of \$18.25 per hour to \$23 per hour by January 1, 2026.

**Longevity Bonuses:** PCAs who work two or more years for the same consumer-employer will be eligible for longevity bonus payments, promoting consistency and quality in care provision.

**Additional Paid Holidays:** Juneteenth and Labor Day will be added to the list of paid holidays, alongside six existing holidays.

**Expanded Paid Time Off:** PCAs will have the opportunity to accrue an extra ten hours of paid time off per year, with increased maximum accruals and carryover allowances.

**Enhanced Health Care Premium Assistance:** The agreement expands access to affordable health care coverage for PCAs, with increased premium assistance and simplified application procedures.

**Support for Career Development:** Funding is allocated for worker orientation, training, and tuition reimbursement, promoting professional growth and improving service quality.

“This contract will lift union PCA minimum pay rate up to \$23 an hour,” Rob Baril, president of SEIU 1199NE, the New England Health Care Employees Union, said. “That’s an important step up for thousands of Connecticut home care workers, who are majority Black, Latina, and White working-class women. They provide love and care at home for our elderly and disabled, but they keep struggling to cover their family’s essential needs.”

There are nearly 12,000 home care workers, also known as personal care attendants, in Connecticut

Cynthia Johnson of New Haven is one of them.

“I love giving care to my consumers. And I know that there are many people out there seeking support to live independently at home,” Johnson said. “With this new contract, both me and my consumers can get peace of mind. I will be able to keep the job that I love so much, provide care for my consumers, and grow as a personal care attendant in Connecticut.”

Members of SEIU District 1199 recently ratified the contract, and it now awaits approval from the Connecticut General Assembly. If approved, the agreement will run through June 30, 2026, marking a significant milestone in the state's efforts to support its home care workforce and ensure high-quality care for Medicaid participants.

But it's not a homerun.

The state finances might be in the black, but they are very close to the spending cap making it a difficult decision for lawmakers.

Republican legislative leaders Sen. Stephen Harding and Rep. Vincent Candelora said they appreciate the work performed by these workers, but question whether the state should move forward at this time.

“Aside from just the budgetary concerns related to this package, we fear this deal sets a new floor for future negotiations of state employee contracts that could drive astronomical spending increases over the long-term,” the two said in a statement.

### *Lamont Highlights Smartphone Lock-Up Program In Schools Inspired by China and Beyoncé*

MANCHESTER, CT – First pitched as part of his state-of-the-state address last month, Gov. Ned Lamont is taking a cue from China and Beyoncé when it comes to social media and smartphones in schools.

In an effort to gain support for coming up with state guidance to lock up students’ smartphones during the school day, Lamont visited Illing Middle School in Manchester to see how the pilot program was going. He was joined by Attorney General William Tong, Connecticut Education Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker, CEA President Kate Dias, and others for the visit.

Starting in December, at the beginning of each school day Illing students were required to store their smartphones in a Yondr pouch, which they then carry through the day. The pouches are locked with magnets that can only be unlocked by school staff.

Lamont and Tong said that they hope to see schools around the state implement similar programs. While it doesn’t appear that there will be state funding for the pouches, Senate Bill 14 could provide a framework for school districts to work independently with vendors to implement a program that works for them.

But a phone neutralization program will not be required throughout the state, Lamont said.

“We believe in local education, so you just let superintendents do their own thing,” Lamont said.

The program at Illing cost roughly \$30,000 for the school to implement, between purchasing pouches and magnets, according to Manchester Superintendent of Schools Matthew Geary. Geary said the school purchased about 1,200 pouches to cover its student population of about 800 students.

Students racing down the halls to record fights, inciting social media drama with their classmates, and being distracted and disengaged from their work were all contributing factors in the decision by administrators and teachers make a policy change.

Smartphone pouch

“This isn’t about penalizing you guys [students],” Dias said. “It’s about freeing you, so you have the opportunity to really focus to just worry about, oh, I don’t know, math class?”

Illing Principal Idelisa Torres said it was important for students to just be able to learn, without having to worry about being recorded or being part of online drama. The program, she said, has brought “such a positive change.”

While students originally petitioned the school to stop the program, at the beginning, several at the event said they had benefitted from not having access to their phones during school. Safety and communication were part of their original concerns, but several students said they were happy to not have to worry about being recorded during the day.

Rep. Jason Doucette and Sen. MD Rahman, both Democrats from Manchester, attended the event and expressed their support for the program and what it means for students.

“Everybody thinks this is a great idea, and I was proud that we were one of the first in the state to do it,” Doucette said.

Rahman echoed Doucette’s comments.

“This program is working because you’re all dedicated and supporting your teachers,” he said.

## **Republican American**

### *Hateful words: Legislators want to study effects of hate speech on children*

HARTFORD – State legislators want to learn more about the effects of hate speech on children in Connecticut.

The Committee on Children heard testimony Tuesday about legislation proposing to establish a working group to study how hate speech affects the mental and physical health and achievement of children from preschool through high school.

Committee members said the study would inform deliberations on state policies to engender tolerance, acceptance, respect and treating others as individuals as youngsters grow up in Connecticut.

Harold Bailey Jr. recalled at the age of 15 being greeted by catcalls and racial slurs from white parents when he was part of a small group of Black students who integrated into a formerly segregated high school in Tennessee.

“Overall, the experience was frightening and trauma to this day,” the Westport man testified.

Decades later, he said his children became targets of racial animus and slurs in Westport schools, and he and his wife decided to enroll them in private schools where they flourished.

“I now see the advent of this same dynamic I lived through as a child and parent being visited upon my grandson,” Bailey said.

Committee members and witnesses agreed hate speech should be defined and treated differently than bullying.

“My thinking is we have to identify this as something that is very different from bullying in general,” Bailey said. “Bullying is such a huge umbrella. It can be as little as a kid nudges me or pushes me around. This is very vicious and it has such a strong impact that I think it should be called out as hate speech.”

Nicholas Kapoor, chairman of the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, said state anti-discrimination laws have 37 protected classes of people.

“Hate speech, to me, would fall more along the lines of being part of one of those protected classes,” he said, “whereas bullying is a bit of a catch-all term that might not be as specific as the specific lists of protected classes that we have in statute.”

The legislation defines hate speech as any form of expression intended to vilify, humiliate or incite hatred against a group or class of people based on race, religion, skin color, sexual identity, gender identity, ethnicity, disability or national origin.

Dr. Tichianaa Armah, president of the Connecticut Psychiatric Society, said she has seen in her practice the detrimental effects of hate speech and discrimination in schools on students, including stark changes in their behavior and well-being.

“It took a lot to get them to even tell me about it,” she said. “They came to me for depression. They came to me for anxiety. But what I was unable to uncover reluctantly from them was that a lot of this had to do with the experiences they were having.”

Armah said she also had some personal experience as a Black mother.

“This starts as early as preschool. I am a mother of two young girls and we’ve been impacted,” she said. “We’ve moved schools because of the daily microaggressions and impact of watching my own little bright star dim for my oldest child. So, this is something that is very important to me.”

The proposed task force would include representatives of organizations dedicated to eliminating discrimination based on race, religion, sexual and gender identity, and disability status. One member must represent a state chapter of a national association of providers of pediatric care, and another must come from a group that advocates for children’s behavioral health and well-being. The state commissioners of public health, mental health and addiction services, and DCF would round out the membership.

Committee members heard recommendations to add a teacher, two high school students, the executive director of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, the chair of the Connecticut Hate Crimes Advisory Commission, and representatives from Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut and the Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers.

### *Lamont negotiates raise for home health aides*

Gov. Ned Lamont and Connecticut’s largest health care workers union announced a tentative three-year contract Tuesday that would boost minimum wages for home health aides by 26% to \$23 per hour by the 2025-26 fiscal year.

But the package, which also would provide longevity bonuses, expand paid time off and reduce health insurance costs for an industry long seeking a major compensation adjustment, puts the General Assembly in a quandary.

Legislators, who now must decide whether to ratify the package, face a similar request for funding from the private, nonprofit social services industry. But there also are restraints limiting state finances, despite projections for another healthy budget surplus.

“This historic agreement shows our commitment to address the worker shortages experienced by some of Connecticut’s most vulnerable Medicaid participants,” Lamont said Tuesday. “It will ensure consumers’ preference to receive care in their own home and community for as long as possible and helps delay or avoid more costly institutional care.”

The tentative contract would affect roughly 11,900 personal care assistants serving about 6,000 low-income clients served by Medicaid,

a federal program run in cooperation with states. Though these workers are paid through a fiscal intermediary, Connecticut covers their compensation through a combination of state and federal funds.

About 80% of these PCAs earn \$18.25 per hour, the starting wage under the outgoing contract, according to SEIU 1199NE, New England Health Care Employees Union. Others with significant experience, or if serving a client with developmental disabilities, earn a slightly higher rate.

The deal announced Tuesday would boost that entrylevel wage to \$20 per hour within 45 days after ratification by the General Assembly. Hourly pay then would increase to \$20.50 on July 1, \$21.50 on Jan. 1, 2025, \$22 on July 1, 2025 and \$23 on Jan. 1, 2026.

“That’s an important step up for thousands of Connecticut home care workers, who are majority Black, Latina, and white working-class women,” said Rob Baril, president of SEIU 1199NE. “They provide love and care at home for our elderly and disabled, but they keep struggling to cover their family’s essential needs.”

The proposed contract also would:

- Provide PCAs who work two or more years for the same employer with a longevity bonus of \$400 or \$800, depending on hours worked per week.
  
- Mandate time-and-a-half pay for work performed on Juneteenth and Labor Day. Home health aides already receive holiday pay for working on New Year’s Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas.
- Increase from 40 hours to 50 hours the paid time off PCAs can accrue annually.
- Expand health insurance premium assistance from 6% to 7% of annual wages.
- Dedicate \$750,000 for working training and development.

Union members overwhelmingly ratified the contract last week, union spokesman Pedro Zayas said.

The deal now heads to the legislature’s Appropriations Committee for review, and many members of that panel have complained PCA’s wages are too close to the state minimum wage, which hit \$15.69 per hour on Jan. 1.

# New Haven Register

## *Mayor Justin Elicker says New Haven is on-track to become largest CT city in 10 years*

Ken Dixon

March 5, 2024

Bills aimed at trying to fill the state's need for as many as 100,000 new dwelling units drew support on Tuesday during a day-long public hearing before the legislative Housing Committee.

But while Republican state lawmakers from Fairfield County defended the incremental increases in affordable housing opportunities in their suburban towns under a controversial 35-year-old state housing law, New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker pointed to 1,900 new units in just a few years, with another 3,500 planned as his city of 139,000 is on track to become the state's most-populace, displacing Bridgeport within 10 years.

"We're growing and we're growing fast," said Elicker, one of 70 state and local officials and residents registered to testify on a variety of housing related bills. "We have a cutting-edge innovation economy here and a strong sense of inclusion. Our residents, as are many across the state, are faced with a very high cost of housing right now and it's leading us to build a lot more units. We're really leaning into this challenge that the state has in our housing crisis and our lack of affordable housing."

He said that of the 1,900 new and rehabilitated units built since 2021, about half are defined as affordable, renting for less than 30 percent of a family's average monthly income. "We're building on parking lots, near transit hubs and opening up the waterfront in our effort to help the state confront this crisis," Elicker said, stressing that building on contaminated urban land at a time of high interest rates makes it more of a challenge.

He said that a priority bill of Senate Democrats, would provide a number of incentives, including a new Housing Growth Fund that would become available to municipalities and developers willing to commit to to initiatives, including a low, 3-percent tax rate for personal property purchases. The proposal would also allow local housing authorities to expand beyond their municipal borders and build in other towns. "We want to build. We want to build affordable, but we need more funding and incentives to help us do so," he said.

Suburban lawmakers led by Sen. Tony Hwang, R-Fairfield, Rep. Tom O'Dea, R-New Canaan, and Sen. Ryan Fazio, R-Greenwich, defended their districts, where some of the most-expensive homes in the state are located. Hwang, whose district includes Bethel, Easton, Newtown and Weston, said that much of Easton contains a lot of the regional supply of drinking water, which should be considered whenever housing mandates are discussed in the legislature.

"Not doing anything doesn't solve the crisis that we have," Hwang said, stressing that the 1989 state statute called 8-30g, which established requirements for affordable housing units in municipal development, has failed.

"I want to make clear that in Connecticut, we have a housing crisis," Hwang said. "We do have an incredible challenge in the state of Connecticut as it relates to access, affordability and equity. We also need to understand that density building doesn't fit in every community. The idea of watershed communities, to be able to protect them from density building, sewage capacity, septic capacity, is an important consideration in regards to quality water but also to environmental impact."

Fazio said that in the off-session, a group put together by Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff of Norwalk and House Majority Leader Jason Rojas of East Hartford, kept a positive public dialogue on the issue going. "I think we're in a weird situation where we have this very adversarial state statute that is making communities very unhappy because it's sort of reducing their input on decision-making," said Fazio, whose district includes parts of North Stamford and New Canaan.

"When we put the localities in charge we get the best results," Fazio said, supporting the expansion of housing through accessory apartments in single-family residences and allowing developers to renovate parts of commercial buildings into dwelling units.

Gov. Ned Lamont and fellow Democrats who have 97-54 and 24-12 majorities in the House and Senate, respectively, have modest goals for legislation this year, focusing on incentives for developers and grants for towns and cities that want to commit to expanding their housing stock.

O'Dea, whose district includes parts of Darien and Stamford, pointed to New Canaan Parish, a 300-unit, municipal-owned development in his hometown. The state statute "8-30g is the number one, two and three issue in New Canaan and Darien because it can have such a dramatic adverse impact on surrounding property owners," O'Dea said. "Builders have proposed affordable housing, then negotiated it away so at the end there is no affordable housing. Affordable units, they don't make money on. The predatory nature of what is going on in New Canaan, Darien and much of Fairfield County has resulted in zero affordable housing being built in New Canaan since the 1990s."

The Housing Committee's deadline to approve legislation is March 14, and the General Assembly adjournment is midnight on May 8.

# Hartford Business Journal

## *Should CT lower working age to address workforce shortage? General Assembly debates the issue*

Skyler Frazer  
March 5, 2024

A legislative proposal requiring the state to study what jobs could be performed by minors as young as 14 years old is pitting labor unions against the business community.

What's in the bill:

Senate Bill 285, which was introduced by the Commerce Committee, would require the commissioner of the state Department of Labor to study what jobs may be performed by minors between 14 and 18 years old. The bill would task the commissioner to submit a report to the General Assembly by the start of 2025.

The bill says the report should include recommendations for changes to allow minors to perform certain jobs in accordance with the Fair Labor Standards Act and whatever regulations are adopted based on the research.

What's at stake:

Supporters say allowing minors to work certain jobs could help mitigate workforce shortages impacting many industries. Last year, state Sen. Eric C. Berthel (R-Watertown) submitted two bills related to reducing the state's working age for certain amusement park and grocery store positions, such as cashier and clerical work.

Who's for it:

The Connecticut Business & Industry Association (CBIA) submitted testimony in support of the study. CBIA lobbyist Ashley Zane said a younger workforce could help employers fill some of the 94,000 positions that are currently open, according to Bureau of Labor statistics data.

"Countless studies have shown that teenage work experience aids in professional and personal development," Zane said. "These experiences help resume building, form relationships, and increase earning potential. Early exposure to potential careers also benefits both employers and young adults."

Who's against it:

State Department of Labor Commissioner Danté Bartolomeo submitted testimony against the proposal, saying the study would require the agency to review statutes and regulations not under its jurisdiction, and put additional burden on the already-strained agency.

Connecticut AFL-CIO President Ed Hawthorne also submitted testimony in opposition of the bill. He said the country has an "unfortunate and long tradition of exploiting child labor," and child labor violations in the 2022-2023 fiscal year were at their highest level in nearly 20 years.

"I suggest to you that acting on a bill that begins a slippery slope of eroding child labor protections would send the wrong message about our values as a state. We urge you to reject it," Hawthorne said.

What's next:

The Commerce Committee held a public hearing on the bill Tuesday. It would need to approve the legislation before it gets sent to another committee or the House or Senate for further debate.

