



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

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Thursday, March 23, 2023

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## *Connecticut bill seeks to block alimony paid to domestic abusers*

State legislators called Wednesday for greater protections for domestic violence victims, including ending the practice of allowing some abusers to receive alimony.

Currently, an abuser can physically assault a victim, and then she could be ordered later in divorce court to pay him alimony.

The bill states explicitly that those “convicted of attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, or certain other Class A or B felonies designated as sexual or family violence against their spouse” could not receive alimony.

Superior Court judges already have discretion in these cases, but advocates say that is not enough.

“There are situations where an award of alimony should simply never be considered by the court, and this proposal removes those situations from the court’s discretion,” said Meghan Scanlon, president and chief executive officer of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. “The prohibition of an alimony award is not sought to limit any power of the court, but rather to eliminate the power of those convicted of the enumerated crimes from continuing to abuse their victim by use of the legal system.”

The bill would help victims “by eliminating the fear to leave an abusive relationship for certain victims, allowing funds to remain at the disposal of the victim to support themselves and their children, and eliminating litigation abuse in these situations,” said Scanlon, who testified Wednesday in front of the judiciary committee at the state Capitol complex in Hartford.

But state Rep. Craig Fishbein, a Wallingford attorney who is the committee’s ranking House Republican, said that judges already have a long list of reasons to block alimony, including considering the duration of the marriage and the causes of the dissolution.

“Isn’t that already baked into the statute?” Fishbein asked.

Nationwide, California passed a similar law, while New Jersey blocks alimony for certain criminal convictions.

“A victim should not have to spend time and money in court negotiating something that is unconscionable for the court to award,” Scanlon said. “To do so would continually revictimize and retraumatize the victim by requiring them to demonstrate fault or the causes of the breakdown of the marriage for as long as the offender elects to abuse the legal system in that manner.”

Senate Bill 5, which covers the domestic violence provisions, includes funding for victims’ services that would be in addition to federal funding. At the federal level, the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Fund has a volatile funding stream because it depends on fees and fines that are collected related to federal prosecutions. The fund covers cases of stalking, child abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual violence. VOCA helped more than 100,000 crime victims in Connecticut in the 2021 federal fiscal year.

The bill calls for \$13.175 million in additional funding for the current fiscal year and \$20 million next year.

The judiciary committee is facing a deadline of March 31 for all bills that are generated by the committee. If passed, the measures would be subject to final compromises before the legislative session ends in early June.

#### Patient privacy

Lawmakers are also debating Senate Bill 3, which is designed to protect a patient's privacy when using online apps, as well as at abortion clinics and doctors' offices.

Liz Gustafson, state director of Pro-Choice Connecticut, said she favors the bill because she is concerned about health data privacy.

"While abortion remains legal in Connecticut, we are not immune to the efforts of the global anti-abortion movement's attempts to restrict or deny access to pregnancy-related care," Gustafson told the committee. "Now, in this post-Roe world, the serious threatened harm by data privacy violations are significantly heightened. Privacy is a non-negotiable."

She added, "Globally, the United States has the largest amount of data breaches. ... In the aftermath of Dobbs, we are no longer speaking in hypotheticals."

Among other provisions, the bill would also block anyone under the age of 16 from establishing an account on social media without parental consent.

Advocates note that online stores, smart watches, menstrual apps, and search engines often collect detailed personal health information. Those details, though, are sometimes sold for marketing reasons. The bill, however, would block businesses from selling the health data unless the person provides permission.

But Tim Phelan, president of the Connecticut Retail Network, said the legislature already passed a landmark consumer privacy bill last year, known as Public Act 22-15, and should wait before enacting any new provisions. The new bill's language, he said, is so broad regarding health that it could be misinterpreted and spill over into retailers as an unintended consequence.

"We are concerned that some of the language under consideration, such as the way in which consumer health care data is described, is overly broad and unspecific," Phelan said in written testimony. "It could therefore be misconstrued to include retailers and retail transactions far beyond what consumers think of as involving health care data. It could, as this bill is written, nonetheless be seen as applying to retail products that neither the consumer nor the business understands to be in any way related to an individual's health."

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### ***ADL audit: Antisemitic incidents increased 100 percent in CT in 2022***

Antisemitic incidents in Connecticut rose by 100% in 2022, according to data released Thursday by the Anti-Defamation League.

The data shows that 68 antisemitic incidents were recorded in Connecticut in 2022, compared to 34 incidents recorded in 2021, the ADL found.

The data shows 55 incidents of harassment and 13 vandalism incidents, according to the ADL.

Nationally, ADL “recorded 3,697 antisemitic incidents in 2022, the highest total since ADL started tracking such data in 1979,” the organization found. “Connecticut is the 29th most populous state with just over 3.5 million residents, and yet ranks as the state with the 11th most antisemitic incidents in the U.S. last year.”

“Connecticut experienced a 100% increase in antisemitic incidents from 2021 to 2022,” ADL Connecticut Regional Director Stacey Sobel said in a statement. “This follows a 42% increase the previous year— a disturbing figure that we hope will serve as a stark reminder of the hard work still ahead to tackle all forms of hate and antisemitism here in our state. ADL calls on everyone to come together to reject hate and extremism and work towards creating a better community that does not exclude, marginalize, or target any person. ADL Connecticut remains committed to working with all communities to unite against hate.”

The ADL data shows 34 communities in Connecticut had at least one antisemitic incident in 2022, compared to 18 municipalities reporting such incidents in 2021.

“Not only did antisemitism increase dramatically in Connecticut but the communities impacted are across every region of Connecticut,” the organization said in a statement on the data release. “Included in the count are incidents of white supremacist propaganda, incidents in K-12 schools, major corporations with DEI insufficiencies, and vandalism of Jewish institutions.”

The data shows that there were 21 swastikas shown in public places, that two Jewish institutions, including a central Connecticut synagogue, received bomb threats, and three “Zoom bombings” were reported at Jewish and Holocaust remembrance events.

“In one particularly concerning incident, a Jewish college student in Connecticut found several swastikas carved into the door of his dorm room,” the ADL statement said. “In other incidents, worshippers walking to synagogue were targeted repeatedly by antisemitic harassment and rocks thrown in their direction. A high school student in Fairfield County was surrounded by a group of students, and called (an antisemitic name) as his kippah was forcibly removed from his head.”

The ADL data also shows Connecticut saw an increase in mainstreaming of antisemitism in December 2022, as Ye’s twitter remarks made national headlines. “From a large sign on a tractor trailer truck supporting Ye, to a middle school student who experienced daily harassment by classmates taunting him for being Jewish and playing Kanye West music on their phones every time he came in a room. This behavior escalated and led to Nazi regime references and significant harassment by the rest of the student body,” the ADL statement reported.

The ADL also shared these national findings:

In 2022, ADL counted antisemitic incidents in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Assaults: 111 incidents were categorized as assault, defined as cases where Jewish people (or people perceived to be Jewish) were targeted with physical violence accompanied by evidence of antisemitic animus, an increase of 26 percent compared to 2021. A total of 139 people were victims of assault, an increase of 6 percent. There was one fatality.

Harassment: 2,298 incidents were categorized as harassment, defined as cases where one or more Jewish people (or people perceived to be Jewish) were harassed with antisemitic slurs, stereotypes or conspiracy theories. Acts of harassment increased 29 percent, up from 1,776 incidents in 2021. Vandalism: 1,288 incidents were categorized as vandalism, defined as cases where property was damaged along with evidence of antisemitic intent or had an antisemitic impact on Jews. Acts of antisemitic vandalism increased 51 percent from the 853 incidents reported in 2021. Swastikas, which are generally interpreted as symbols of antisemitic hatred, were present in 792 of these incidents, up 37 percent from last year.

589 incidents targeting Jewish institutions such as synagogues, Jewish community centers and Jewish schools, an increase of 12 percent from 525 in 2021.

Antisemitic activity reported on college and university campuses increased by 41 percent in 2022, with 219 incidents reported at more than 130 campuses nationwide. In non-Jewish K-12 schools, 494 incidents were reported, an increase of 49 percent.

The ADL said the audit includes “criminal and non-criminal acts of harassment and intimidation, including distribution of hate propaganda, threats and slurs, as well as vandalism and assault.” It was compiled using information “provided by victims, law enforcement and community leaders, and evaluated by ADL’s professional staff.”

The information assists the organization “in developing and enhancing its programs to counter and prevent the spread of antisemitism and other forms of bigotry,” the ADL said.

### *CT legislators trying to salvage endangered Lamont recycling plan*

The Lamont administration’s ambitious plan to overhaul Connecticut’s waste-disposal and recycling system is being scaled back by legislators in the face of opposition from the industry and some municipalities.

The Democratic co-chairs of the Environment Committee, Rep. Joe Gresko of Stratford and Sen. Rick Lopes of New Britain, said Wednesday the new, narrower focus of House Bill 6664 will be on removing food products from the waste stream and mandating recycled content in packaging.

“The vibe for this bill is it’s on life support,” Gresko said.

A disposal fee of \$5 on every ton of municipal solid waste shipped to out of state landfills is gone from the bill, and implementation of “extended producer responsibility,” or EPR, for recycling would be made provisional on its broader acceptance by other states.

“We’re probably going to move some version of the bill out of committee with the understanding that there is a short distance to go to get some things agreed on — and a really long distance to go to get it all agreed on,” Lopes said.

Connecticut already has facilities that can use food waste, which tends to be heavy and can greatly add to disposal tipping fees, to generate natural gas or, in the case of a processing plant Gov. Ned Lamont toured last week, make animal feed. The challenge is to build a system to collect and deliver the food waste.

There is a consensus behind continuing to experiment with ways to remove more food from the waste stream and to mandate manufacturers make greater use of packaging with greater recycled content, Lopes and Gresko said.

An Environment Committee meeting scheduled for Wednesday was postponed to Friday.

“I think the adjustments they’ve made have made it more palatable,” said Sen. Stephen Harding of Brookfield, the ranking Senate Republican on the Environment Committee.

But Harding said he still had doubts about EPR, even if adopted on a provisional basis.

EPR would shift the cost — and potentially control — of recycling from municipalities to manufacturers. It is used in parts of Canada and Europe, but has yet to be implemented by any state in the U.S.

Connecticut already has EPR for a limited list of products unsuitable for single-stream recycling, such as paint, propane cylinders, electronics and mattresses. Lawmakers said the case has not been made for a broader version that would cover all packaging.

“Our position on EPR is that it should not be a one size fits all approach to every product,” said Tim Phelan, who represents retailers at the state Capitol.

With the support of the governor, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection has made a priority of increasing recycling and lessening the current need to export 860,000 tons of municipal solid waste to landfills in Ohio and Pennsylvania every year.

“And DEEP laid out a very comprehensive plan in this bill to do it,” Lopes said. “But there was significant resistance because this this plan would create an awful lot of change in the industry. And sometimes when you have an awful lot of change, it’s hard to accept all at once.”

Waste haulers questioned the need for an all-encompassing version of EPR in a state with widespread single-stream recycling that goes to materials recovery facilities to be sorted and sold for reuse in the manufacturing of new products and packaging

Katie Dykes, the commissioner of DEEP, said there is no evidence EPR has forced an increase in consumer prices in Canada or Europe, but lawmakers and industry representatives are skeptical.

“Ultimately, if you’re going to implement this EPR program universally, absolutely it is going to be baked into the cost of all the consumer goods that you’re going to be purchasing as a resident here in the state,” Harding said.

Aside from the cost issue, Harding said the administration has not made a convincing argument that EPR would increase Connecticut’s already respectable rate of recycling.

“What we really are asking is that this is the solution, or even a significant solution, to the problem?” Harding said.

Lamont and Dykes, who spoke at an event kicking off “climate action week,” were aware of the changes being made, especially dropping the \$5 charge that prompted opposition by municipalities, which now pay an average fee of \$102 a ton to dispose of waste.

Whether it is climate change or waste disposal, anything that costs money is controversial.

“I know what everybody’s against. Tell me what you’re for, or you just want to pay lip service for the environment, because ‘now’s not quite the right time?’” Lamont said. “I don’t think we’re really asking people to give up a lot.”

### *Connecticut bill would open centers for safe drug use*

Advocates gathered Wednesday at the state Capitol to call for the passage of S.B. 9, which among other public-health initiatives would establish places where drug users can safely use illegal opioids.

Harm reduction centers — also called safe injection site — are found worldwide, in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and Ukraine, according to Drug Policy Alliance.

Naloxone is a powerful antidote to overdosing and it may soon be available over the counter for anyone to use. Emergent Biosolutions manufactures the drug known as Narcan, and if approved by the FDA, an over the counter option would be available as a nasal spray. Narcan may soon be available over the counter. Veuer’s Keri Lumm reports.

In the United States, they are legal only in New York. The 22 state senators who are co-sponsoring S.B. 9 hope Connecticut will be the second.

Saud Anwar (D-South Windsor) is one of them. He held a news conference in advance of the public hearing on S.B. 9 urging passage of the bill. According to the most recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1,371 Connecticut residents died of drug overdoses in 2020.

“Today we have to ask ourselves a question: How many more? If there is a number that they are waiting for, I want to know what that number is,” Anwar said.

“Every day, we are losing four people in our state. Four people who were beautiful individuals, part of a family ... with a full, hopeful life ahead of them, and it was taken away from them,” he said.

At harm reduction centers, those with drug addictions can bring drugs bought elsewhere and consume them at the sites. A staff of trained health care workers will monitor their usage and reverse an overdose should one occur.

OnPoint NYC, which operates the New York safe injection sites, announced last September that 500 overdose deaths were prevented by staff at the centers. No one has died of overdoses at the centers.

At the news conference, Mark Jenkins, executive director of Connecticut Harm Reduction Alliance, anticipated pushback. “The most effective public health responses don’t always tend to have favor with the public,” he said. But he urged passage of the bill.

“And at what point will we stop doing some of the same things and expecting different results? ... The recovery world is doing the same thing and expecting different results,” Jenkins said. “We’re asking you all to think outside the box.”

John Lally of Ellington, an ARPN and executive director of Today I Matter, Inc., brought a photo of his son Tim to the news conference. Tim died of an opioid overdose at age 29.

“We’re talking four people lost a day in Connecticut. But we’re not talking about numbers, are we? We’re talking about people,” Lally said. “What we’ve done has not helped. Let’s try something different, because what we’re doing is not working.”

S.B. 9 would authorize the state departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Public Health to establish harm reduction centers in three municipalities in the state, with the permission of those municipalities’ elected officials.

Centers would employ health care professionals with overdose-prevention experience, who would keep an eye on people using drugs, provide sterile needles if needed, reverse overdoses should they occur using naloxone or other opioid antagonists, and refer people to drug counseling.

Among those giving testimony at the hearing on Wednesday in support of S.B. 9 were dozens of health care executives, social service workers and family members of overdose victims.

One of them was Dita Bhargava of Shatterproof, which advocates for easier access to addiction treatment. Bhargava’s son, Alec Pelletier, died of an overdose of fentanyl on his 26th birthday.

“Our moral, social and economic obligation is to find bold solutions to end this crisis,” Bhargava said. “Overdose prevention clinics have proven to keep loved ones alive long enough for them to find help.”

Other elements of the umbrella health-and-wellness bill include new legislation regarding fertility treatments, qualifications for health educators, opioid prescription controls, protocols for first responders, establishment of a health care career advisory council and access to reproductive health services.

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## *2,500 protest abortion at Connecticut March for Life*

Reinvigorated by the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, thousands of anti-abortion activists rallied outside the state Capitol Wednesday for the second annual Connecticut March for Life, pushing their dream of an abortion-free state.

Carrying religious iconography, “Choose Life” signs, and ultrasound photos, protesters bussed in from across the state filled the Capitol’s North Lawn. A representative from the Capitol Police estimated that 2,500 people joined the Hartford rally and march around Bushnell Park — an uptick from the hundreds of attendees counted in 2022.

Over cheers and applause, Peter Wolfgang, president of the Family Institute of Connecticut, called that first march “the beginning of a new era for the pro-life movement in Connecticut.”

“What has happened since we met here last year? *Roe versus Wade* is over. And someday the 1990 law, still keeping abortion legal in Connecticut will be over, too,” Wolfgang said. “Someday when we live in a Connecticut where every unborn child is protected in law and welcomed in life it will be because you are here today.”

Wolfgang and others attacked legislative proposals to expand abortion protections in the state. Protestors locked in on what they described as “taxpayer funded abortion tourism” in H.B. 6618, a proposal to implement a “Safe Harbor Fund” that would cover certain costs for women who travel to Connecticut in search of a legal abortion.



Former politician Christopher Healy, executive director of the Connecticut Catholic Conference, which co-hosted the event, emphasized civic engagement and contacting lawmakers to block legislation. In addition to abortion, Healy also opposed medical aid-in-dying and urged attendees to “stop the culture of death that permeates our society, our state, and our neighborhood.”

“Your voices, when they’re told directly to a lawmaker, a state legislator or a state senator, will be heard, especially if you do it over and over again,” Healy said. “You’ve got to urge others. It’s not just an email, it’s not just leaving a message, it’s asking for an audience.”

The sole lawmaker to address the crowd was Democratic State Rep. Treneé McGee, whose remarks emphasized “creating a culture of life” by investing in women, mothers, children and education.

“As I think about the 69 million abortions that have taken place, and how 19 million of them were Black children, I think about my community. It becomes very personal to me,” McGee said. “We’ve learned that when we create safe environments, women feel safe to have children, carry life, and produce life. So in creating a culture of life, we have to care about one another.”

Several women in the female-heavy lineup of speakers spoke against beliefs that equate reproductive freedom with feminism.

“I went off to college and was surrounded by so-called feminists who convinced me that women’s empowerment meant full access to abortion without restrictions,” march director Erin Getz of the March for Life Education and Defense Fund. “Abortion harms women physically, mentally, emotionally.”

Melissa Manion, who had an abortion before joining the pro-life movement, spoke about “stolen fatherhood.”

“The anthem is ‘my body, my choice’ and although we hear a lot about the fact that there is an entirely separate body involved, we never hear about stolen fatherhood,” Manion said. “I decided to have an abortion without my boyfriend’s knowledge or consent. I called Planned Parenthood and made that appointment. ... When my boyfriend came home happy as usual I looked him in the face and essentially told him, ‘I am ending the life of our child and there’s nothing you can do about it.’ ”

Making their way toward Bushnell Park, anti-abortion marchers crossed paths with a small group of counter-demonstrators bearing rainbow flags and signs in support of reproductive choice.

“We felt that we had to have a presence here,” Barb Kapustynski of the Norwalk Actions for Reproductive Justice said.

As the masses marched on, Kapustynski and Melissa Murray said that the crowd is not indicative of the Connecticut electorate.

“We know the majority of voters actually are for abortion and see abortion as health care,” Murray said. “We know what happens when women can’t choose their lives. It’s important to allow women to have the health care to choose their lives and make their own decisions.”

## CT Mirror

### *Stone Academy students left in limbo as they await audit*

Jennifer Mendez, a student in Stone Academy's licensed practical nurse program, was scheduled to take her exit exam on July 8.

Yet after nearly two years of hard work and sacrifice, she worries it was all for nothing as she waits to see if any of her credits will be counted toward completion of her LPN certification.

Mendez, 35, is one of hundreds of students who were studying practical nursing at one of Stone Academy's three Connecticut campuses when it abruptly closed in February and are now caught in the crossfire between the school's lawyers and the state Office of Higher Education.

The nursing school closed its doors amid questions about its examination passage rates, faculty qualifications and clinical training. Since then, about 850 students have been unable to obtain their transcripts while the Office of Higher Education audits the academy's records to determine the validity of its coursework. The state is demanding that Stone pay \$200,000 for that audit.

The clash between state officials and Stone Academy has left Mendez and her classmates in limbo. Mendez, who has been working as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home for the last 10 years, said it's a frustrating position to be in after years of spending money and time on a program that she was hoping would help her serve her patients better.

She recalled having to watch her oldest child's high school graduation on a computer because she had a final exam that day. She missed out on time with her mother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer, to attend classes. She says she also spent hundreds of hours in class away from her 3-year-old daughter.

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That's not including countless hours studying, doing homework or driving from her home in New London to East Hartford three times a week.

Mendez said the school notified students of the closure on Valentine's Day.

"While we were in class that night, they sent us an email saying the school will be closing at the conclusion of tonight's classes," Mendez said. "There was no information given. Nothing was told to us. We had no idea."

It felt like the school decided it was "just done with us all," Mendez said.

"I wasn't ready to say goodbye to all my classmates. Me and those girls have been through so much together. We've cried together. We laughed. We've helped each other pass exams. We studied together. It's just very heartbreaking," Mendez said. "And then it went to anger. I drove over 30,000 miles on my new car to get to this program. I missed time with my daughter. My mother got diagnosed with breast cancer while attending this program. I couldn't be there for her. I feel like it was all for nothing."

Until last year, Stone Academy was owned by Mark Scheinberg, the founder and president of Goodwin University in East Hartford. He was forced last May to divest and pay \$1 million to resolve allegations that Stone had concealed a high rate of student loan defaults.

Stone now is held in a trust managed by his son-in-law, Joseph Bierbaum. Scheinberg's brother, Richard, also is a trustee.

Stone Academy, with campus locations in East Hartford, West Haven and Waterbury, now faces a new investigation by Attorney General William Tong for potential violations of the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices Act in regards to the closure.

"This is an active and ongoing investigation," said Elizabeth Benton, spokesperson for the attorney general's office. "We have received and are reviewing thousands of documents from our initial civil investigative demand. We have also sent two subsequent civil investigative demands and subpoenas for testimony to Stone's leadership, specifically Richard Scheinberg and Joseph Bierbaum."

Although its shutdown came without warning, evaluations of the school have been ongoing for several months, according to the state's Office of Higher Education.

State officials and lawyers for Stone sharply disagree over the chain of events preceding the closure, the legal basis for assessing attendance and qualifications of staff, and the propriety of the Office of Higher Education seizing student records.

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"Indeed, most of the components of Stone's programming now alleged to be deficient were reviewed and approved by DPH in October of 2021 and by OHE in January of 2022, when each agency separately approved Stone's program," wrote Perry Rowthorn, a former deputy attorney general who represents Stone.

Rowthorn said in a letter to the attorney general's office that "systemic dysfunction" and an "erratic regulatory process" within the Office of Higher Education contributed to Stone's closure and the uncertainty over the value of the training provided to its students.

"To be very clear, Stone students' transcripts are accurate. Students legitimately earned the clinical credits reflected on their transcripts," Rowthorn wrote. "Students should be allowed without any further delay to obtain their transcripts and, if they wish, present them to other schools so they can continue their education."

Debate over scope and cost of audit

The Office of Higher Education tells a different story.

Tim Larson, the former state senator who is executive director of the agency, said initial evaluations were underway because Stone Academy was set for its renewal process this year. Stone's last approval was in January 2022 and was set to expire on Jan. 25 of this year. The Office of Higher Education typically begins its evaluations a few months prior to expiration.

On July 29, however, the Office of Higher Education began to investigate a compliance complaint from a student, including concerns regarding program issues like clinical cancellations and lack of attendance records, Larson said.

The school then underwent a hearing in the early fall with the Department of Public Health after analyzing its NCLEX scores, Larson added.

The National Council Licensure Examination is the final test nursing students must pass at the end of their programs.

“[Schools] have to have a minimum of 80% [of students passing] and last year, ... the highest score was [70],” Larson said. “[The Department of Public Health] asked them to explain, and they didn’t give a real solid answer. So, [the department], discontinued their East Hartford day program. In the meantime, ... West Haven’s day and evening cohorts also were under some discussion.”

The Department of Public Health did not respond to questions from the CT Mirror about why the East Hartford day program was closed and West Haven’s programs were being monitored, or how many students at Stone Academy took the exam last year.

The Office of Higher Education decided to hire a DPH investigator to help with additional evaluations of the nursing school for its renewal, according to Larson.

By late December, the Office of Higher Education called for a “compliance conference,” Larson said, where the department highlighted eight significant violations at the school, including allegations that 20% of the school’s instructors were not qualified to teach.

“They had an opportunity to refute all of these violations ... and they didn’t,” Larson said. “We could understand that during COVID, there were issues. We could understand that hiring, sometimes, was an issue. But when they didn’t refute any of this stuff? It caused us great alarm.”

The Office of Higher Education then requested an audit, so it could “understand, in the grand scheme of things, what the impact on these students was,” Larson said, adding that the audit would help determine how many credits and clinical hours students were missing and how to “facilitate a repair of their education.”

Larson said Stone Academy agreed to the request on Jan. 27, but over a week later, on Feb. 6, the school sent the Office of Higher Education a notice that it was planning to shut its doors. It did not notify students at the time.

“They sent a letter to us that they closed. We did not close them,” Larson said. “In fact, I extended their authorization for two more months to accommodate an audit. ... I [just] needed to understand what the damage was and if, in fact, they had the ability to patch this back up.”

Rowthorn insists in his communications with the attorney general’s office that the higher education office forced the closure, and its allegations, such as a claim of unqualified staff, are due to a misunderstanding of the law and the actual duties of some employees.

“OHE has failed to provide a detailed explanation for these allegations, but it is apparent that they are based on fundamental misunderstandings of fact and law,” Rowthorn wrote. “By way of example, most of the staff now claimed to be unqualified instructors were, in fact, staff hired to accompany students on observational clinical experiences after DPH specifically advised that no regulatory qualification requirements existed for such staff.”

The for-profit nursing school also initially agreed to pay for the audit that would analyze records for more than 800 of its students, but, after learning it could cost around \$200,000, has been in a back-and-forth battle with the Office of Higher Education for weeks about who would pay the bill, Larson said.

In a letter to the attorney general’s office, Rowthorn said there is no legal requirement for such an audit when a school is closing and that a decision by federal education officials to cut off funding changes Stone’s finances.

“You point to previous indications of Stone’s willingness to fund an audit but ignore significant changes in circumstance since those discussions occurred,” Rowthorn wrote. “Stone’s financial ability to continue its programs, let alone to fund an audit, was significantly impaired by the United States Department of Education’s imposition of restricted cash flow status, a step we believe was likely motivated by OHE’s posture towards the school.”

Larson said the Office of Higher Education had wanted to use the same firm that conducted an audit when Goodwin College purchased the University of Bridgeport. The \$200,000 price tag would cover time and staffing.

“You have 800 students, you probably have to put two hours together per file ... so that would be 1,600 hours,” Larson said. “Then they backfill however many people ... they need to accomplish that. [The auditors] would also be coordinating an effort with my staff ... so that every one of these Stone students has someone that they can talk to individually about what their concerns are.”

Rowthorn questioned the need for the audit and warned of its harm to students, to whom he insisted Stone is committed to assist.

“In that spirit, we will not condone — let alone fund — a misguided audit that will wipe away their hard-earned educational achievements,” Rowthorn wrote. “We urge OHE to deviate from a course that places its interests in direct conflict with those of Stone students and graduates.”

Cynthia Jennings, an attorney and political activist who says more than 20 women harmed by the closure have contacted her about possible litigation, is placing some fault for their situation on the Office of Higher Education. An audit now feels like a punishment toward the students, she said.

“The Office of Higher Education should have done an audit before they had that school open up. You should have done an audit before you took their student loan money,” Jennings said. “There’s no money that’s going to make up for what they’re going through right now. Some of them are homeless. They took off [work] and intentionally went and sacrificed time with their family, they got extra jobs, they took up all these loans. ... Don’t just take their money and then turn around and say, ‘We’re going to investigate here to see if their courses were accredited.’ Why would they be accredited? They haven’t even had an opportunity to take their exams.”

Jennings called the audit “a mass issue of discrimination because most of those students are Black and brown students.”

During the first week of March, the Office of Higher Education held informational sessions for students to learn about future steps, including the ability to transfer credits to nearby institutions, tuition refunds and loan forgiveness.

“[The information sessions were] more for those that are willing to start over, and I just put in 18 months of my time. I can’t start over,” Mendez said, adding that the most important questions, especially for students who were close to graduating, went unanswered.

“The [other nursing schools] said until the Office of Higher Education releases our transcripts, and we know which classes are actually validated for the credits, they can’t do anything for us,” Mendez said.

The audit is expected to take several months.

“We want to look at your enrollment agreement and what you signed up for when you were supposed to graduate. We want to look at your transcript to see what classes you took and when you took them,” Larson said. “Then we need to overlay that against a credible faculty member for your classwork and the same thing for clinical work. [We’re] just straight up trying to clean up the transcript. ... We’re probably going to have to interview some of the students. We’re going to have to interview some of the older faculty. ... Then continue to sanitize the list, so that we make sure we have accurate data and that we’re in agreement on where the students can progress.”

Next steps for students

Larson said that there are four options for Stone Academy students.

“The first step is if they no longer pursue a practical nursing program, we would want their transcripts and find out how they were paying for it and then refund their tuition,” Larson said.

Sean Seepersad, the division director of academic affairs at the Office of Higher Education, said most Stone Academy students were paying for the school through financial aid, so those refunds and loan discharges would be through the U.S. Department of Education.

“For students who paid tuition out of pocket, not federal financial aid, currently the statute allows for a refund of tuition from the student protection account for approved courses or units of instructions in which the student was unable to complete because of the closure of the school,” Seepersad continued.

Larson said students who were just starting their programs could restart at another school without waiting for the audit.

“[That’s mostly for students] who say ‘I’m not going to transfer anything. I started in December or January, so I really haven’t accumulated a transcript,’” Larson said.

Some students who were at the finish line, depending on what the audit concludes, may receive a certification of completion from the Office of Higher Education. But for those who were in the middle of their program and want to transfer their credits to another school, it will be a complicated process.

“If you’re taking Pell [Grant] money, you need to keep your loan default rate very low. ... They have to have the wherewithal to pay this money back [if they continue their education],” Larson said. “[The transfer schools] also are rated on their own performances, and they don’t want to bring Stone students that are not prepared into their cohort and drag down their performance rating status. So it’s very, very complicated, and that’s where we are right now.”

Mendez said Lincoln Tech told her at an information session that she could pick up her education if her credits are validated. She said others, like Porter and Chester, told her that her credits would first need to be approved, then she’d have to undergo additional testing, which would determine her placement in the program, she said.

In the meantime, many students are hoping to rile up enough support to warrant intervention from lawmakers.

“These young women are going to talk to legislators all over the state. They’re going to put pressure on them to pass them a special act so that they can go take their boards. They’re going to look for support so that they can have classes,” Jennings said. “We need to talk about how important it is that their elected officials protect them at this point.”

A protest outside the Office of Higher Education, which is based in downtown Hartford, is scheduled for March 28.

Either way, it's a waiting game for Mendez and her fellow classmates.

“If it comes to worst-case scenario, where my credits aren't validated at all, there's Three Rivers Community College over by my house, and I figure I'll just go to night school there and skip the LPN and go for the RN,” Mendez said. “I'll just start over and go higher because that was originally my goal. So now I'm like, ‘Well, if none of this counts, and none of this matters, I'll find a school closer to home, and I'll just go that route.’”

And even though Mendez has a back-up plan, that doesn't mean it will make the process, or the uncertainty behind it, any easier, especially if she needs to start all over again.

“[The last few months have been] countless nights of me staying up — falling asleep — on the couch with my laptop ... or fights with everybody, because I'm not there, and I can't do anything for anybody because I'm always so tired from working and going to school,” Mendez said. “It's hard because now my daughter is getting used to me being home all the time. And when I start a program again, it's going to be heartbreaking for her because, ‘Where's mommy? Why isn't mommy home?’ ... [I'll] never have time for everybody.”

### *CT senators push for federal gun violence prevention office*

Connecticut's senators are pushing new legislation to create a permanent office within the U.S. Department of Justice to focus on a “coordinated government response” to gun violence prevention and help implement the bipartisan gun safety bill passed by Congress last year.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., and Rep. Maxwell Alejandro Frost, D-Fla., introduced the Office of Gun Violence Prevention Act on Monday to promote collaboration between administration officials, gun violence survivors, public health officials, mental health providers and other stakeholders involved in the issue. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., co-sponsored the bill.

The sponsors of the bill say it will establish a centralized place within the federal government to address gaps in research, offer policy recommendations, enhance the National Instant Criminal Background Check System and give Congress an annual report about gun violence.

As he works to help enact parts of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act that passed last June, Murphy said, he realized the challenges of doing so without such an office since multiple federal agencies are involved.

The Murphy-led bill strengthened background checks for those buying firearms under age 21 and incentivized states to pass “red flag” laws that permit a court to temporarily prevent someone from buying a gun if they are a threat to themselves or others. It also provided substantial funding for schools and mental health services.

“It's dizzying to understand how many different offices, how many different federal officials are involved in just implementing this one bill — a bill that doesn't solve the whole problem,” Murphy said. “But nowhere in the federal government is there one office dedicated every single day to coordinating the effort of addressing gun violence.”

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“We need one office at DOJ that is tasked with making sure that every office in the federal government has the resources it needs to coordinate between the federal level and the state level to best implement this bill,” he added.

While Murphy and Blumenthal have been working on gun safety for years from Congress, Frost made his legislative debut on Monday with the introduction of the House version of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention Act. He is the youngest member of Congress at 26, and prior to his election in November, he served as the national organizing director for March for Our Lives, an advocacy group that formed after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Fla.

Standing outside of the U.S. Capitol, the three lawmakers were joined by gun safety advocates including survivors of mass shootings. Po Murray, chairwoman of Newtown Action Alliance, and Nicole Melchionno, co-chair of Junior Newtown Action Alliance and a survivor of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, both urged the passage of this bill and gun safety legislation to make school lockdowns a “relic of the past.”

The bill’s announcement comes as the Connecticut-based group prepares for a Friday rally — Generation Lockdown — with other gun safety groups in Washington, D.C. Jackie Hegarty and Jordan Gomes, who both survived the Sandy Hook shooting, are slated to speak at the rally as members of Newtown Action Alliance.

Since the start of the new session of Congress, Murphy and Blumenthal have been active on other gun safety legislation, including the reintroduction of the federal assault weapons ban and legislation to promote the safe storage of firearms called Ethan’s Law. The bill is named after Ethan Song, a teenager from Guilford who accidentally shot himself in 2018 with an unsecured gun at a friend’s house. A version of that was signed into law by Gov. Ned Lamont in 2019.

Congress implemented a federal assault weapons ban in 1994, but it expired in 2004 and has not been restored despite pushes from some Democratic lawmakers and gun control advocates.

But without enough support from lawmakers for these measures, President Joe Biden is going it alone to address additional gun safety reforms in the absence of additional legislation. He announced executive orders last week that would seek to further expand background checks.

While the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act was a rare bipartisan effort on the issue of guns, Congress has been mostly gridlocked on passing other reforms such as the prohibition of assault weapons and universal background checks. Any bill on that issue, including the Office of Gun Violence Prevention Act, will need Republican support in both the House and Senate.

Republicans have been largely resistant to such legislation, and any gun-related bill will face more legislative hurdles now that the House is narrowly controlled by the GOP.

When asked if any of the 15 Republican senators who voted for the bipartisan gun safety bill would support this new effort, Murphy said he has had “early conversations” with GOP co-authors of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. He said he is hopeful for their support because they have seen firsthand “the need for resources and focus and direction.”

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The Democratic lawmakers acknowledged the challenges of passing more legislation responding to gun violence, but they argue the creation of a central office focused on the issue has more of a chance of getting through a divided Congress.

“Any time that you’re talking about legislation in the same sentence with gun violence, it’s an uphill battle,” Blumenthal said. “It may be uphill, but this is a lot more in the realm of possibility than some of the other stuff that we’ve been talking about doing.”

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## **CT News Junkie**

### *Judiciary Committee Weighs Recommittal Policies for Involuntary Psychiatric Patients*

The legislature’s Judiciary Committee wrestled Wednesday with how the state handles involuntarily committed psychiatric patients when they reach the end of their court-imposed term of commitment.

The panel heard testimony on a bill that would change the review process for patients who serve their terms after being committed by a court as a result of a not-guilty acquittal by reason of insanity.

The proposal essentially takes the Connecticut Psychiatric Security Review Board and state superior courts out of the process once the patient reaches the end of their court-imposed term and directs prosecutors to petition a probate court to recommit acquittees who continue to pose a danger to themselves or others.

The change was controversial among speakers testifying before the committee.

Some, like the Office of the Chief Public Defender, argued the bill would fix the state’s current system, which more easily allows offenders to be recommitted and penalized for longer than courts had envisioned. Sometimes those commitments last for longer than the maximum criminal sentence allowed for the offense under which they were found guilty.

Several patients at Whiting Forensic Hospital in Middletown agreed on this point when they addressed the committee through virtual testimony. Hal Bassow, a Whiting patient for more than a decade, told lawmakers that patients feel as though they have been committed indefinitely, regardless of their court-imposed term.

“When you come to an institution such as Whiting and under the Psychiatric Security Review Board, you have that stigma that says you are indefinitely committed for the rest of your life on a term that will never end,” Bassow said. “It’s not fairness. It’s not justice and it’s certainly not recovery and the real madness [is] we’re told to tolerate this in our state.”

Others, like the state Division of Criminal Justice, argued the change was both premature and potentially dangerous. Waterbury Judicial District State’s Attorney Maureen Platt said that the PSRB was a

specialized body familiar with the mental health conditions of the patients under its purview. As of Tuesday, she said that amounted to a group of 141 patients, 37 of which had been recommitted.

Replacing the process with a less specialized procedure posed a greater risk to society, Platt said. Although prosecutors would still be petitioning for recommitments, she said they would have a more difficult time securing those orders from a probate court than they would from a superior court.

“It is a vastly different standard,” Platt said. “We would argue public safety would be jeopardized and the probate court could not consider the danger to the community.”

Meanwhile, Platt and others urged the Judiciary Committee to wait until a working group, which was established by a state law passed last year, finishes its current review of the process. That group is expected to report back to policymakers in January.

A member of that task force, Andrew Reynolds, offered to keep the committee updated on the panel’s work. Reynolds, whose niece, Jessica, was murdered by a psychiatric hospital escapee in 1989, said the group’s recommendations may include drastic changes.

“This could include the dissolution of the PSRB or transformation of the PSRB. Why change things until the final report is finished?” Reynolds said.

At times during the lengthy hearing, which included 80 other agenda items, Rep. Craig Fishbein, R-Wallingford, suggested to opponents that the change would not necessarily result in the release of every patient who hits the end of their term as prosecutors would continue to petition for recommitment when they deemed it appropriate.

“What I’m wrestling with is a court at some point determined that this individual was going to be penalized for a finite number of years,” he said. “The jurisdiction of the PSRB falls within that finite term of years.”

### *Flavored Nicotine Ban Stalls in Public Health*

A proposal to ban the sale of flavored tobacco and vape products in Connecticut won’t advance this year after the Public Health Committee stripped the legislation Monday and used it as a vehicle to boost funding for tobacco cessation programs.

The bill had sought to prohibit the sale of flavored nicotine products with the exception of menthol in an effort to reduce smoking and vaping among young people. The Public Health Committee has advanced similar proposals during the last several sessions only to see them scaled back by the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee and later stall out altogether.

This year, the Public Health Committee made its own alterations. During a Monday meeting, the panel jettisoned the nicotine ban and installed two new concepts before advancing the formerly controversial bill on a comfortable 34 – 3 vote.

In its new form, the proposal will do two things: it will boost tobacco settlement funding for smoking cessation and prevention programs from \$12 million to \$22.7 million, a number recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. It will also create a working group to evaluate taxes, fees and penalties related to the sale of nicotine products.

In an interview Tuesday, Rep. Cristin McCarthy Vahey, D-Fairfield, said some members of the committee were not comfortable with advancing a flavored tobacco ban in part due to disputes over the

efficacy of such prohibitions. McCarthy Vahey, partway through her first session as the panel's co-chair, said she felt more groundwork needed to be done in order to get a ban across the finish line.

“That’s why you step back and say, ‘Okay. What can we do first?’ Number one is ensure we have the proper funding; two is let’s make sure we have the right information to have this conversation,” McCarthy Vahey said. “And then we’ll circle back.”

Free of the controversial prohibition, the bill found broad support on the committee. Rep. Jamie Foster, D-Ellington, said she hoped the working group created under the bill would recommend licensing fees for nicotine sellers and fines for bad actors that were high enough to support broader enforcement of rules barring the sale of nicotine to minors.

“I can’t think of a good, credible reason why anyone would argue against fines for selling to minors or increasing licensing fees to make sure that we can enforce that folks who are selling tobacco products are making sure they’re selling them to the right people who should have access versus those who shouldn’t,” Foster said.

Other lawmakers praised the increase in funding for the Tobacco and Health Trust Fund. Last month, an action network with the American Cancer Society chided Gov. Ned Lamont for proposing a budget that reduced support for the fund. The governor’s proposal calls for transferring \$6 million to the fund in each of the next two years.

On Tuesday, McCarthy Vahey said she took her lead from what she called “the Big Three:” the American Lung Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Heart Association.

“It was very clear in talking with them that their number one priority this year was assuring the proper funding from the tobacco settlement fund dollars,” she said. “We wanted to send a clear message that we’d like to make sure those things are properly funded... We felt that the request for \$22.7 million, which is the minimum recommended amount for Connecticut from the CDC, that would be our ask.”

It was unclear Tuesday how that ask would be received by the legislature’s budget-writing committees currently crafting an alternative to Lamont’s proposal. The governor’s administration, meanwhile, argued that the funding included in his budget would amount to \$24 million over four years, far outpacing the fund’s support during prior administrations.

Although those questions will be worked out in the coming weeks, debate over a flavored nicotine ban in Connecticut likely ended on Monday. Asked whether the long-stalled proposal would continue to be part of the conversation in Connecticut, McCarthy Vahey recalled her grandfather, who died of emphysema when she was young.

“Tobacco prevention and cessation has been an issue of mine since I was in high school,” she said. “I do see a future in this conversation, absolutely.”

## **The Day**

## *New bill would address competency and release notifications*

A bill under consideration by the state legislature would alert victims of violent crimes when the individual accused of those crimes, but never prosecuted because of mental illness, is about to be released into the community.

The bill, [RB1231](#), is sponsored by State Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton and tailored to fit the local [case of James Armstrong](#), the man charged with murder in the shooting death of his cousin, Ralph Sebastian Sidberry in North Stonington in 2017.

Armstrong remains in civil commitment under the care of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, because he was deemed to be not competent to stand trial and not able to be restored to competency.

Armstrong suffers from schizophrenia and personality disorder and claimed to police that Sidberry was spreading HIV to fellow members of the Eastern Pequot tribe. Sidberry did not have HIV. State Statute 54-56d, relating to competency and a defendant's early release into the community, does not presently require DMHAS to notify victims when a person who is committed is to be released into the community. Under terms of the proposal bill, notification would come to a victim registered with the Judicial District Office of Victim Services. Presently, victims are only notified when a person who has been convicted of a crime is released.

Katherine Sebastian Dring, who continues to fight for Armstrong's prosecution in the death of her son, has said the lack of notification is an alarming oversight. Dring and Somers were at New London Superior Court earlier this year when they learned Armstrong, being treated at Whiting Forensic Hospital in Middletown, was being considered for release by the Middletown Probate Court. The proposed bill also would not allow the state to release someone like Armstrong from custody without a "final examination" and would allow state prosecutors to recommend who does the examination. Somers said the competency evaluations typically are done by a group of physicians chosen by DMHAS.

The bill was to be taken up on Wednesday during a public hearing before the state Judiciary Committee. Kirk Lowry, legal director for the Connecticut Legal Rights Project, Inc., took issue in his written testimony with some of the proposed changes. Lowry called it "probably unconstitutional" for the state to continue to hold an individual who was civilly committed.

"What RB1231 is attempting amounts to the punishment and state detention in a psychiatric hospital of a person who has been charged but not tried or convicted of a crime," Lowry wrote. "This provision attempts to criminalize a person's disability in most if not all instances and fails to respect the constitutional rights of people with disabilities and the rule of law."

Dring did not testify at Wednesday's hearing but said she continues to fight for Armstrong's prosecution.

"My comments about CT General Statutes 54-56d have already been made clear in my testimony before the New London Judicial Criminal Court that this competency law usurps the criminal Justice system and violates my rights to due process and equal protection of the laws under the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution by allowing an arrested murderer to go free," she said in an email to The Day.

The New London County State's Attorney's Office was recently granted a motion to allow a third-party physician to perform a competency evaluation on Armstrong. That evaluation is pending.

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## *Committee passes bill to allow pharmacists to prescribe birth control*

The Public Health Committee on Monday passed [a bill](#) allowing pharmacists to prescribe birth control. State Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton [proposed](#) the legislation with State Sen. Ryan Fazio, R-Greenwich to increase access to birth control, especially to women working in under-served or rural areas. She said there are always a “few bumps in the road” and there was originally a little bit of [push-back](#) from some doctors.

Since then, the bill has been refined to mirror what other states have done, she said. Pharmacists would receive the training they need, as well as their technicians.

Locally, the committee bill is co-sponsored by Somers, and state Reps. Aundré Bumgardner, D-Groton, Devin Carney, R-Old Lyme, and Holly Cheeseman, R-East Lyme.

The Public Health Committee also passed [a bill](#) that would allow emergency contraception to be sold in vending machines on college campuses. Locally, the bill is co-sponsored by Carney and Cheeseman. Plan B already is available over the counter but not every pharmacy is open 24/7, and this is a time-sensitive issue, so the bill would help increase access for college students, Somers said. Both bills next move to the General Assembly for consideration.

“I think it’s very positive that they both have bipartisan support to be able to make it across the finish line of the legislative process,” she said.

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## **Journal Inquirer**

### *Paraeducators ask for better pay, working conditions*

Connecticut paraeducators want higher salaries and more attention paid to staffing levels, they told the state legislature’s Education Committee at a public hearing last week.

More than a dozen paraeducators, who provide support to students and teachers, testified in support of House Bill 6881, which would set a minimum salary for paras, offer them better health insurance, grant them a larger role in the planning and placement team process, require an annual report on staffing levels for the position and more.

“Despite the importance of our jobs, we are the lowest-paid employees in the school,” said Beth Vickery, a paraeducator at East Hampton High.

“Paraeducators have the closest relationship with students, usually working with the ones that need the most support, yet we are not compensated accordingly.”

Numerous paraeducators described salaries below living wages, paid out only during the school year and not in the summer.

Under the proposed bill, paras would earn a minimum salary no less than three and three-quarters times the federal poverty level for a family of two (or just under \$68,700 currently).

“Unfortunately, with all the wonderful education that we provide for our students, we are understaffed and underpaid,” testified Victoria Ceylan, a paraeducator for pre-K students in Danbury. “I have been a paraeducator since 2014, and as embarrassing as this may be to say publicly, I make under \$16 an hour.”

Ceylan's son A.J., a Danbury High grad and current UConn student who has cerebral palsy, also testified Wednesday, telling the committee he could not have made it through school without his paras who "went above and beyond their call of duty to help me be the best I can be."

He recalled one para from elementary school who taught him an array of fundamental skills and another from high school was like a "second mother."

"Paraeducators are heroes in my eyes because they help students like me who can't do everything on their own," Ceylan testified. "We need help, and paras are our parents away from home, constantly educating us and protecting us."

Some paraeducators who testified described feeling overworked and under-appreciated, contributing to an alarming turnover rate in the profession. Amid a broader teacher shortage statewide, paraeducator positions have often proven particularly difficult to fill.

"I fear many will no longer choose to be paras if something is not changed now," Debra Field, another para at East Hampton High, told the committee. "The high turnover rate and vacant paraeducator positions in the state affects the quality and consistency of the education of our schools' most vulnerable population, special education students."

Though testimony for the bill, both written and in-person, was largely in support, the proposal drew opposition from the executive director of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns, who argued that a minimum wage and better health insurance for paras "will impose significant costs on municipalities that are already struggling to fund the cost of education."

Similarly, Stephanie Levin, an administrator in the Somers school district, wrote that "the rates that are proposed in this bill would create a significant financial impact to towns." She described the proposal as "concerning" and criticized "the overreach by the state to dictate wages on a local level."

Charlene Russell-Tucker, the state's education commissioner, offered support for some aspects of the proposal but wrote that an annual report of paraeducator staffing "would represent a massive data collection burden on both the local school districts and the state" and that boosting pay to the level called for in the bill would pose "a challenge."

The paraeducator bill is co-sponsored by four Democrats, three in the state Senate and one in the state House. It was one of 11 up for review by the Education Committee on Wednesday. Other proposals related to air quality in schools, teacher certification, restraint and seclusion of students and more. Committee members will now decide whether to advance the paraeducator proposal, which has support from the Connecticut Education Association and several unions that represent paras.

"It is long past due that we show our paras they are valued in our school districts and pay them a living wage," Tricia Santos, a former para in Killingly who now works as a union staff representative. "Paras know what is best for our students, and it is time to tell them thank you for all they do."

### *Transgender youth: 'Forced outing' bills make schools unsafe*

TULSA, Okla. (AP) — Al Stone-Gebhardt worked hard in school to make sure he graduates in May, and he spent hundreds of dollars on commencement regalia, but he is fully prepared not to participate in the ceremony.

The 17-year-old, who is transgender, said he fears his high school, Tulsa Union, might use his deadname — the name he was given at birth but no longer uses — on his diploma and during the ceremony instead of his legally changed name. He has had teachers call him by his birth name, sometimes inadvertently, and said he finds the experience traumatizing.

“Being deadnamed just immediately makes you feel belittled, weak and insignificant,” Stone-Gebhardt said. “I didn’t want to be in the classroom. I didn’t trust the teacher.”

After The Associated Press contacted the school about Stone-Gebhardt’s concerns, a spokesperson said the school will work with his parents to make sure his correct name is used.

As hundreds of bills nationwide take aim at nearly every facet of transgender existence, from health care to athletics to bathroom access, trans kids and their families say certain proposals could eliminate one of the last remaining safe havens to explore their identities: K-12 public schools.

Several “parental rights” proposals, which aim to give parents greater control over their children's education, would formally allow or require schools to deadname trans students or out them to their parents without consent. While some parents and teachers argue they have a right to know, others warn it could jeopardize the mental health and physical safety of gender-nonconforming children and place educators in the crosshairs.

More than 25 proposals introduced across 14 states include provisions permitting teachers or fellow students not to honor the name and pronouns that align with a student’s gender identity. Some of those proposals and other standalone measures, including at least two at the federal level, would require parental permission to use different identifiers. At least a dozen would also require schools to alert parents of gender identity changes in most circumstances, which trans students like Stone-Gebhardt say would strip them of their privacy and autonomy.

The Oklahoma State Department of Education proposed new rules this year that would require parental notification if a child begins expressing gender identity questions. A similar proposal in the North Carolina legislature, where Republicans are just one seat shy of the supermajority they need to override any veto from the Democratic governor, passed the Senate last month and is now in the House.

They mirror laws enacted last year in Florida and Alabama, and guidelines in Virginia, that prohibit schools from withholding gender identity information. Florida Republicans advanced legislation this week that would expand the law critics dubbed “Don’t Say Gay” to prohibit schools from addressing students with pronouns that don't align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Some education officials support the idea of notifying parents about identity changes. Education guidelines on social transitioning, including when to involve parents, vary widely across states and school districts. Such proposals would provide uniformity that some educators say is currently lacking.

“As a parent, I’d absolutely want to know that, and I think most parents do,” said Ginger Tinney, executive director of Professional Oklahoma Educators, a nonpartisan association that represents educators from across the state. “When it comes to serious stuff like this, this tells me the child is struggling with some major issues, and they need their mom and dad to know.”

But others, like Emily Osterling, a high school special education teacher in Wake County, North Carolina, say the reporting requirements force teachers to betray their students’ trust or risk losing their

job. While collaboration with parents is essential to her work as a special educator, she said, it cannot come at the expense of any student's safety or scare teachers away from building bonds with their students.

"Students wouldn't trust teachers anymore," Osterling said. "You're putting educators in a very, very bad position. It's kind of taking pieces of our job to a different level. A job is your source of income, I mean, it's your livelihood."

When Renee Sekel's nonbinary teenager first requested a different name on their Christmas stocking, she responded with "absolutely not" in what she now considers "the wrong reaction." The mother of three and local activist in Cary, North Carolina, said she took about six months to accept the new name.

After hearing her child's teacher call them by that name in a parent-teacher meeting, Sekel said, she realized her child was already happily out at school. In time, she grew thankful that the public school had been a safe and affirming place for her child to express their identity before it was fully accepted at home — and that they were able to tell family on their own terms.

"I failed as a parent in not giving them the freedom and the safety they needed at home," Sekel said. "But they were able to find it at school."

Now, Sekel said, it's worth sharing her own shortcomings to preserve that safe space for other kids. Proposals with forced-outing provisions could create life-threatening situations for those with unsupportive families, she said.

"I'm not LGBTQ or anything, but I was abused as a child, and school was the place where people didn't call me names or didn't hit me. School was safe for me," she said. "Forcing teachers to call home and tell the parent things that those children have told them in confidence is going to hurt kids, it's going to get kids beat."

Supporters of the North Carolina bill have repeatedly pointed to an exception that would prevent parents from accessing school records if there's reason to believe it would lead to abuse or neglect. But Osterling said teachers are not always able to spot signs of abuse and cannot predict how every parent will react. Her concerns echo those of several psychologists who have testified against the bill.

Sarah Warbelow, legal director at the Human Rights Campaign, said bills that explicitly mention gender identity are not the only ones that could out an LGBTQ student. Broad language in parental rights proposals in states like Idaho, which would require that parents be informed of any change in their child's emotional health or well-being, could be interpreted to apply to sexual orientation or gender identity, she said.

Idaho parent Kris Huntting consoled their teenage son, who is trans, after most of his teachers deadnamed him on the first day of school, in accordance with a new policy. Huntting said he had spent the day terrified for his closeted trans friends with disapproving parents who had been told they needed parental permission be called a name other than the one they were assigned at birth.

The Nampa high school rolled back the policy after Huntting raised concerns. But Huntting still worries the bill, which passed both chambers and was sent last week to the Republican governor, could be broadly interpreted to make it a statewide standard.



“Your child is a whole human,” Huntting said. “If they want you to know this thing about their existence, they’ll tell you. But using the ‘I have a right to know’ ... it’s based on the assumption that being trans is harmful and something to be helped.”