

State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING HARTFORD,
CT 06106-1591

Athletic Trainer Task Force

Meeting Summary

Friday, January 1, 2025

12:00 PM on Zoom and YouTube Live

I. Convene Meeting

- The meeting was convened by Eleni Diakogeorgiu at 12:35 PM.
- Attendance: Gary Morin, Eleni Diakogeorgiou, Jennifer Tirillo, Andrew Abraham, Robert McKee, Jessica Testani, Sara Montauti, Dr. Stephanie Arlis-Mayor
- Guests: Henry Rondon

II. Introduction of Members

- Task force members in attendance introduced themselves.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

- The current number of unfilled positions in-state
- Impact of COVID-19 and the transition to a master's requirement
- Average number of athletic training graduates per year from Connecticut programs

- Average student debt
 - Eleni Diakogeorgiou commented that during COVID many of the athletic trainer programs were changing from a bachelor's level to a master's level. She noted that the number of athletic trainers and students decreased because of that transition. She mentioned that the issues outlined in the agenda are concerns that she and Gary Morin have heard from stakeholders around the state. She asked members to share any issues they are hearing about.
 - Gary Morin commented that high school settings are hardest hit by the shortage, and he stated that a quick search showed that there were twenty unfilled full-time positions within Connecticut. He mentioned that Quinnipiac University is dropping their athletic trainer program as well as that for 2024. The number of athletic trainer graduates were 25 and that over the course of 2022-2024 there were 42 athletic trainers that graduated and only 21 remained in Connecticut. He asked members for their perspective on the shortage.
 - Jennifer Tirillo introduced herself and stated that two issues she sees is the decrease in students applying to programs and a decrease in professionals. She commented that many people are leaving due to burnout, salary, and not treating the staff with the respect they deserve. She mentioned that it takes time to prove the value of an athletic trainer and that they aren't treated with the respect their field deserves. She asked why people are choosing athletic trainers in the first place and that the task force will have to look at why people aren't coming back, as well as why they choose it in the first place.
 - Andrew Abraham commented that he has seen school districts where they increase compensation to attract athletic trainers and schools that wouldn't offer the same compensation but then those same schools, a year later, post positions for athletic trainers for double the amount of money they were asking for the previous year. He stated that it is frustrating trying to prove the value of your profession day in and day out and then when athletic trainers leave, they realize how valuable athletic trainers are. He mentioned that seven school districts hired internally which is good for the profession but challenging for retention of athletic trainers.
 - Stephanie Arlis-Mayor commented on the relationship between physicians and athletic trainers as many doctors in the state are unaware of athletic Trainers which she says emphasized Jennifer Tirillo's point about the value of the profession. She stated that physicians have offered positions for athletic trainers as healthcare

extenders, and this dilutes the field as athletic trainers are in demand more. She mentioned that she has heard from people who have left college based athletic training that a major factor was the lifestyle issue as the hours make it hard to live a normal life. She stated that if alternatives are offered in this field, then people will leave for those alternatives like an office-based practice.

- Jessica Testani shared information from a NATA (National Athletic Trainer Association) white page survey where they found that twenty-five percent of athletic trainers are leaving secondary school or planning to leave and twenty-eight percent plan to leave the athletic trainer profession. She believes that compensation is a major issue as compensation hasn't been changed for twenty to twenty-five years in most places. She commented that the value of athletic trainers is also an issue as there is a perceived lack of support. She reiterated the issue of work life balance as people lose their reason for working due to all these issues as well as the consistency of these issues.
- Robert McKee commented that athletic trainers are like a security blanket as they know everyone in the community and that he employed an athletic trainer for twenty plus years and that athletic trainer resigned due to starting a family and the work life balance issues. He was expecting that trainer to be replaced by the contractor, but they weren't able to hire anyone. He mentioned that their schools will have games and sometimes they won't have an athletic trainer on the field.
- Henry Rondon stated that the number one priority is making sure that the student athletes are performing in a safe environment. He believes that the initial issue is either the lack of programs in the state or the lack of students that are going into the program. He is interested to see what the universities are doing to recruit for these programs as well as what other states are doing. He commented that he views the issues of the athletic trainer profession to be like those experienced by educators.
- Jennifer Tirillo stated that she is a preceptor for athletic trainer students and that feedback she has heard from students depending on the program is that the students were being prepared for something else and not to become an Athletic Trainer. She believes that Henry Rondon's point about education needs to be considered as the programs for Athletic Trainers should teach students to become Athletic Trainers.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated that she and Gary Moring have spoken to some program directors and that there are four master level Athletic

Trainer programs in Connecticut which are UCONN, CCSU, SCSU and Sacred Heart University of Fairfield. She commented that Quinnipiac has an undergraduate level program, and they are not transitioning it to a master's program. She reiterated that they need to increase the level of students applying for programs as well as retaining them. She believes that the issues are burnout, shortage of professionals and the perceived value of Athletic Trainers. She stated that the transition from undergraduate programs to master level programs have attracted individuals who want to stay in the profession. She commented that they may send a survey to alumni to ask why they have left or stayed.

- Andrew Abraham believes that they have look at what they can control in the scenario as secondary school Athletic Training is a second shift position and that is not changing. He commented that there are Athletic Trainers who will want a transition away from a second shift position and towards a more regular nine to five. He stated that student loans aren't going away, so he suggested a student loan forgiveness program. He mentioned the compression effect on salaries in the field and asked how they will show if wages are rising as that is an issue. He likes Henry Rondon's idea of getting students into the profession and the marketability issues surrounding that. He breaks down the issues between what can and cannot be controlled, he believes that salaries and the perceived value of Athletic Trainers can be controlled to an extent.
- Henry Rondon mentioned teachers' salaries and how they start off low and they have to wait to see the value of their profession.
- Andrew Abraham stated that Athletic Trainers as a profession doesn't have that salary scale. He believes that having a career ladder or a system that shows that an Athletic Trainer can grow is important. He doesn't know why they haven't mentioned unionizing but believes it could be a solution.
- Jennifer Tirillo reiterated the issue of perceived value of Athletic Trainers as they are second shift and are essentially doing the three jobs of Nursing, Counseling and Athletic Training after school hours. She believes that the burden and liability is really high for secondary school Athletic Trainers.
- Jessica Testani believes that there is a misconception between when they say second shift and how others are interpreting that as their workday starts in the morning. She stated that stakeholders see ten percent of what Athletic Trainers are doing and the other ninety percent happens before that second shift time. She believes that

communicating their profession accurately is important as the professions perceived value is becoming more important.

- Eleni Diakogeorgiou believes that a majority of the discussion can be translated to collegiate Athletic Trainers.
- Jessica Testani agrees with Eleni Diakogeorgiou and reiterated the issues of perceived value and the inconsistency of work environments for each position.
- Gary Morin stated that Athletic Trainers are a unique profession as new hires out of college will be by themselves as there isn't support staff. He mentioned the case of an Athletic Trainer who made a call in a game where the audience verbally abused them, and no one stood up for them which caused the Athletic Trainer to leave the profession. He believes that there has to be some type of support for new hires to help them get their bearings.
- Andrew Abraham agrees with Gary Morin about having some type of support staff for Athletic Trainers and mentions that there needs to be a good relationship between the Athletic Director and Athletic Trainer.
- Stephanie Arlis-Mayor agrees with Andrew Abraham and states that there additionally needs to be a good relationship with the team physician and Athletic Trainer.
- Jessica Testani agrees that in some area's stakeholders aren't aware of the relationship between staff and the amount of support that each staff give to each other.
- Robert McKee reiterated the importance of the relationship between staff.
- Jessica Testani stated that they are trying to avoid scenarios like Gary Morin mentioned and she believes that they will not be able to hire Athletic Trainers without communicating their value.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou believes that they are seeing these issues globally for Athletic Trainers too as a reporting structure plays an important role. She believes that the issues are stakeholder education and educating new students. She believes reaching students early on is important to raise awareness of their profession as well as retaining staff.
- Gary Morin added the issue of student debt and the cost of education.
- Jessica Testani added the issue of the cost to maintain their

certification.

- Gary Morin agrees with Jessica Testani and stated that the cost is six hundred dollars a year. He stated that the average national Athletic Trainer's graduate debt from a master's program in 2022 is \$86,184 with the hardest hit demographic being minority populations. Athletic Trainers debt make up one hundred thirty percent of their annual income and the average Athletic Trainer is spending 19% of their monthly income on debt payments nationally.
- Andrew Abraham believes that those numbers are the biggest reason for why students are not choosing their profession.
- Gary Morin stated that the problem with programs is that they view Athletic Training as a stepping stone to something else.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated that the issues are student debt, cost of maintaining the certification, education of stakeholders, education to recruit. She believes that the two education pieces go together into bringing new people into the profession and the issue of cost of maintaining the certification relates to retaining staff. She added that the issue of mentorship and support structure can be placed into educating stakeholders.
- Jennifer Tirillo asked Robert McKee and Jessica Testani if they have ever considered or talked about intraprofessional collaborations like establishing repour with Athletic Trainers.
- Robert McKee stated that at the State level they have emphasized the importance of Athletic Trainers as well as the situation around their profession.
- Andrew Abraham asked Robert McKee if there is education at the State level on how Athletic Directors can educate up their chain of command on the need of Athletic Trainers. He stated that he sees the miscommunication one or two levels above the Athletic Directors.
- Robert McKee stated that at the State level the landscape is changing and that there have been discussions regarding costs. He commented that they have discussed at the State level regarding communication but isn't aware of educational material about communication. He mentioned that he uses Jessica Testani as a resource to educate other Athletic Directors about Athletic Trainers.
- Andrew Abraham would like to formalize that process as he had many Athletic Directors reach out with questions.

- Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated that it is budget season for many boards of education and many budgets are tight this year. She asked how they can best disseminate information showing the need of Athletic Trainers.
- Robert McKee believes that educating Athletic Directors is important as well as having a conversation with the higher ups. He believes that even if they fix the secondary problems the main problem is that they don't have enough Athletic Trainers so they should be looking at promoting the profession.
- Andrew Abraham asked if they need ten open positions that are highly coveted and highly valued so that they can weed out some of the school districts that are paying less than they should. He doesn't know if they have to get the good positions open or try to attract students to the profession first as he is currently seeing students not attracted to the profession.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou believes that they can work in tandem as they have to be trying to fix these issues at the same time and not separately.
- Stephanie Arlis-Mayor asked if they could form a relationship with ESPN so that they can speak to the value of Athletic Trainers.
- Andrew Abraham stated that the NFL pushed that initiative with their broadcast groups.
- Jessica Testani agrees with Eleni Diakogeorgiou about fixing these issues in tandem and reiterated the issue of perceived value as they have to back the value of Athletic Trainers collaboratively.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated a lot of the chatter in the classroom comes back from clinical sites as the programs have students out at these sites. She believes that working collaboratively will help retain staff and it could potentially bring back staff that have left the field.
- Jessica Testani mentioned that she has lost many colleagues to other states and the Athletic Trainers who have left to other states mention perceived value as a major reason.

IV. ISSUES SPECIFIC TO SETTINGS -COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- High School

- Clinical Athletic Training / Sports Medicine Clinics
- Collegiate
- Emerging Settings

V. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- Increasing enrollment at Athletic Training programs in Connecticut
- Increasing incentives for ensuring Athletic Trainers remain as athletic trainers
- Incentives for Retention and bringing Athletic Trainers to Connecticut
 - Gary Morin believes that some changes will take time like cultural changes in the profession. He mentioned the time constraints of the Task Force and that he and Eleni Diakogeorgiou have looked at what other states are doing in preparation. He stated that Maryland created a grant program that creates an incentive for high schools to add onto the Athletic Trainer salary. He stated that Alabama has done something similar and additionally student loan programs that reduce student loans. He stated that Louisiana does something similar with the reduced student loan program. He mentioned that Connecticut has done something similar with undergraduate programs and that is limited to first come first serve. He mentioned the Connecticut Health Horizons program and suggested adding Athletic Trainers. He commented that they are looking at low hanging fruit solutions currently and later they can discuss solutions to change the environment.
 - Stephanie Arlis-Mayor commented that for residency programs they have to give back a certain number of years to the community.
 - Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated that the solutions she is hearing is some form of loan forgiveness, funding to help create educational programs about Athletic Trainers, licensure fees and funding pathways to help put Athletic Trainers in schools.
 - Andrew Abraham commented about a bill that didn't pass that had a minimum salary of \$60,000 for educators in State and there was a fund for schools to pull money out of to pay teachers if needed. He asked if there could be a similar structure for Athletic Trainers.
 - Jessica Testani mentioned that Alabama had a similar structure and that they had a formula to help schools in more underserved populations.

- Eleni Diakogeorgiou asked Jessica Testani if the NATA sent summarized information on what other states are doing.
- Jessica Testani answered that they directed them towards Louisiana, and Alabama. She mentioned a solution that they have not discussed but the NATA has mentioned is tax credits for childcare to help ease the work life balance.
- Andrew Abraham mentioned that the bill was Senate Bill 381 from 2024.
- Jessica Testani commented that they should be looking at creative solutions like Hawaii where all Athletic Trainers are employed by the State and money is taken from the PGA tour to fund these Athletic Trainers.
- Andrew Abraham commented that Hawaii has a good job at retaining staff.
- Gary Morin added that Hawaii mandates that high schools above a certain number have two Athletic Trainers. He asked if they should recommend a certain number of Athletic Trainers for a high school based on student athlete numbers.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou believes that is important just for health and safety as they will need more Athletic Trainers to ensure coverage.
- Jennifer Tirillo asked if the language has changed for the CIAC where they recommend Athletic Trainers and if that has changed to a requirement.
- Henry Rondon answered that it is still recommended.
- Jennifer Tirillo believes that there is a disconnect as a school brought in an Athletic Trainer to highlight the importance of Athletic Trainers.
- Sara Montauti commented that the Task Force should be cautious of requiring Athletic Trainers at the larger schools as smaller schools are busy too. She mentioned that she left the profession because of the work life balance and stated that no amount of money would bring her back to the profession if it meant losing that balance.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou agrees with Sara Montauti and added that it depends on the type of sports as well. She commented that they can create a formula to figure out how many Athletic Trainers are needed at a particular school.

- Jessica Testani added that they should be looking not only at the number of athletes but also at how many things are happening simultaneously to ensure coverage. She believes that they need to look at consistency of care across the number of athletes and the number of competitions that an Athletic Trainer is in charge of.
- Andrew Abraham asked if anyone is aware of the steps Massachusetts has taken to require Athletic Trainers at football games and what Connecticut can do as well.
- Henry Rondon believes that it makes sense to require Athletic Trainers at collision sports because something can go wrong, but the issue comes in with certain sports as some games won't be played if they had the Athletic Trainer requirement.
- Andrew Abraham asked if they could broaden the language to require schools to have an Athletic Trainer.
- Henry Rondon stated that the situation that Jessica Testani described is true where there are multiple games happening and the school has one Athletic Trainer to cover those.
- Jennifer Tirillo added that they have no Athletic Trainers.
- Andrew Abraham agrees with Jennifer Tirillo in that the obstacle is bigger than that as there are schools where there is an Athletic Trainer that is covering a huge number of students but the issue, he sees is the schools with no Athletic Trainer.
- Jessica Testani mentioned the issue of taking care of student athletes that are not within their school district as they have to regularly do that when they come to play games.
- Stephanie Arlis-Mayor commented that the language is written that way because there is a shortage of Athletic Trainers. She doesn't disagree that every school should require an Athletic Trainer, but she cautioned the Task Force about any unintended consequences.
- Andrew Abraham asked if Jessica Testani could reach out to Athletic Trainers in Massachusetts to see what that legislation looks like in the past few years.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou agreed that they can reach out and asked the Administrative Staff about the process of scheduling.
- The Administrative Staff commented that scheduling is up to the discretion of the co-chairs.

- Eleni Diakogeorgiou mentioned that the solutions they discussed were addressing the cost of the certification, student debt, any possible funding for education, scholarship funding as well as other avenues that they can take. She mentioned that she and Gary Morin will compile a list of solutions that they will share with members, and that they will send out a poll to figure out the best time for another meeting.
- Gary Morin agreed with Eleni Diakogeorgiou and asked Administrative Staff how fast they can prepare the meeting summary.
- The Administrative Staff answered that they can get the meeting summary in by Monday.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou stated that they will provide a summary at the State EATA meeting. She mentioned that she will send something to members by Wednesday and commented that the document will change throughout the legislative session.
- Stephanie Arlis-Mayor asked if she can share this discussion with CSMS.
- Eleni Diakogeorgiou responded that is fine as well as stating that the meetings are publicly recorded and thanked members for the discussion.
- Jessica Testani thanked members for the discussion.
- Gary Morin thanked members for the discussion.

VI. Discussion

- Meeting Schedule
- Membership Appointments

VII. Announcement of Time and Date of Next Meeting

VIII. Adjournment

- The meeting adjourned at 1:58 PM