



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

Connecticut General Assembly Select Committee on Children

Public Hearing
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**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman
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Senator Meyer, Representative McMahon, and members of the Committee, I am here today to testify in favor of bills before you that look to systemic responses for problems facing children. These include S.B. 303, 344, 304, and 340. These bills concern child and family poverty, service integration, children with parents in prison and families most in need. The Commission on Children applauds the Committee for raising bills that strengthen the systems that serve them.

Senate Bill No. 303, An Act Creating a Comprehensive System for Children and Families from Birth to Five

S.B. 303 seeks to treat the customer rather than state agencies. Our service system for children and families is organized in silos and 'sub-silos.' Many providers and policy leaders are making valiant efforts to meet the holistic needs of children and families.

They come up against a fragmented system with categorical funding, limits on eligibility, numerous and different accounting and reporting requirements and standards that bump against one another.

There is no coherent system for young children, but programs of different sizes that are not aligned. Nor are the programs linked to a shared goal and outcomes for children. Many families choose not to use what would help their children due to the confusion and necessity of going to 10 different places. The baby in the King Solomon story is more than cut in half.

A parent recently in a focus group said, "You (the state of Connecticut) have so many programs and policies. But what about us? What about the parents." This bill strives to begin to address this national problem through contracting rather than changes in departments or reconfiguring of responsibility. The latter have not been proven to work.

S.B. 303 begins with the agencies that work with children. It includes a model pilot on the community level to be selected by the Early Childhood Education Cabinet.

It lists core prevention strategies that should be coordinated across department to include: families being served within the context of community, strength-based approaches, cultural competence, research -based interventions with performance measures and consumer access.

This bill will be threatening to some. It changes how we do business. But our business should be for children. Not for the agency, funding stream or protocols that people got familiar with. We need to turn the wheel around to get the vehicle in drive for the family and good child outcomes.

I offer suggested amendment language to the committee that limits the scope, tightens the language and puts in the community pilot.

Senate Bill No. 344, An Act Concerning Family Prosperity and the Recommendation of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council

This Committee has a strong commitment to the challenges facing children in poverty. You passed a bill that is considered the national model for child poverty reduction with the end goal of cutting child poverty by 50% by 2014. We needed clear targets and proven interventions to get there. We have selected these. Now we need the community partners to work with the state to reach this goal.

Nearly 90,000 Connecticut children — live in families whose income is below the federal poverty level. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of our state’s children live in low-income households with income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

The costs of child poverty for children and families are severe: Children in poverty are more likely to have the following health problems: bacterial meningitis, infectious disease, low birthweight, lead poisoning, asthma, anemia, stunted growth, obesity missed immunizations, hunger/food insecurity, lead poisoning, and poor cognitive development

- Children in poverty are up to three times more likely to die during childhood.
- Children who are poor are more likely to lack housing, adequate food and health care, and to receive lower scores in math and reading.
- By the time they begin formal schooling, children in low-income families already lag significantly behind their more affluent peers academically, socially and physically.

Child poverty is also very costly for businesses, consumers and the state:

- Businesses pay when poor children grow up to become less educated, less productive workers who require additional training, cannot read well enough or work fast enough to master work responsibilities and new techniques.
- Consumers pay when higher business costs and lower productivity result in higher prices, lower quality or limited selection of goods.

- Each year that a child spends in poverty results in a cost of \$11,800 in lost future productivity. The Connecticut labor force is projected to lose as much as \$1.1 billion in future productive capacity for every year that the current number of Connecticut children lives in poverty.

This bill takes the core target populations of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council and the core strategies and priorities of the Council and localizes them. Five municipalities will partner to embed research based poverty reduction strategies focused on family income and earning potential, education and vocational training, income safety net services, and family structure and support including programs to reduce teenage pregnancy.

This bill will cost to provide the dollars to the community. However, we have located an untapped funding stream for our state, the FSET, that can help match some of the implementation costs in areas of employability. I include both the priorities of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council and an article on the FSET funds just referenced for your review. The costs of poverty far surpass the costs of its eradication.

Senate Bill No. 304, An Act Concerning Children of Incarcerated Parents

Seventeen thousand children in our state have parents in prison. This is a conservative number. They have a seven times greater chance of going to prison themselves than their peers who do not have parents in prison. They are being targeted by gangs as a prime group for gang membership.

The bill before you seeks to put in place the policies and programs to break the cycle of incarceration for these children, especially to assist children of color, who are disproportionately represented in the ranks of children of incarcerated parents. The bill designates a position in the Department of Corrections to serve as a family liaison and asks the Department to join with other state agencies in a focused manner to provide community base services to these children and families.

The Commission on Children is a member of the Coalition for Children of Incarcerated Parents. Members of the coalition represent key state agencies including the Departments of Correction, Education, Children and Families, the Judicial Department and Probate Court, as well as non-profit agencies, parent advocates and researchers.

In Connecticut, there are no systematic, standardized policies or practices to address the needs of children when a parent is arrested and or imprisoned. We hope that this bill will foster a holistic approach to dealing with crime and crime prevention, especially in Connecticut's urban cities. Often these children are involved with the Department of Children and Families, in the foster care system, and living with relatives who do not have the where with all to care adequately for them. Often these children suffer from mental health issues and all too often are failing in schools. It is up to us to connect the dots and understand that it is better to ensure the safety, and wellbeing of these children in order for them to lead productive lives, instead of waiting until they have dropped out of school and are involved with gangs and other criminal behavior.

Senate Bill No. 340, An Act Establishing and Early Childhood Integrated System of Care

Connecticut has a keen focus on prevention and results based accountability as fundamental principles for state public policy. The bill before you reflects both principles, and seeks to duplicate a researched based early intervention program for high risk families experiencing mental illness, substance abuse, depression or other factors that put them and their children at risk for poor development and life long problems. Issues include: Serious emotional disturbance; developmental problems; special education; child abuse and neglect with foster placement. Research informs us that early intervention works.

Child First is the brain child of one of the most respected, dedicated pediatricians in Connecticut, Dr. Darcy Lowell, who developed this national model with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at Bridgeport Hospital. For the past several years, the program has worked in partnership with many providers and community based organizations. They have developed an integrated model of service as a community and refer high risk families to Child First for intensive, home based services.

The comprehensive model includes:

- Screening for emotional/behavioral and developmental problems and environmental risk
- Mental health consultation in early care and education, pediatrics, and with other community providers
- Comprehensive assessment of the strengths and needs of the whole family
- Development of a comprehensive, family-driven plan
- Care coordination/case management to insure that families can access services
- Intensive, home-based mental health services

The infant-toddler report of the Early Childhood Cabinet, “First Words, First Steps,” focused on developing a comprehensive system in local communities to serve the needs of all families in a continuum of services, from universal to targeted services. Child First has accomplished this in the region of Bridgeport with proven results. The bill seeks to expand this evidence-based model to at least one more region with hopes of establishing a system of care in every region for families and children. We urge support for this exemplar early intervention system.

For the record, the Commission also supports:

- S.B. No. 268, An Act Prohibiting Smoking in Motor Vehicles with Minor Children;
- S.B. 159, An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education;
- S.B. 160, An Act Providing Parents or Guardians with More Involvement During the Commitment Process of a Child with the Department of Children and Families;
- S.B. 338, An Act Concerning Permanency for Children; and
- H.B. 5102, An Act Providing a Subsidy from the Department of Social Services to Persons Participating in the Department of Children and Families’ Subsidized Guardianship Program.