



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



Connecticut General Assembly Human Services Committee and Select Committee on Children

Public Hearings on the Department of Children and Families (DCF)
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Testimony of Elizabeth C. Brown
Legislative Director
Connecticut Commission on Children

Senator Harris, Senator Meyer, Representative Villano, Representative McMahon and members of the Select Committee on Children and the Human Services Committee:

The Commission appreciates the opportunity to testify before you today on the important functions and mission of the Department of Children and Families. I would like to preface my remarks by saying the Commission has the utmost respect and appreciation for the outstanding work the Department does on a daily basis in doing an extremely difficult job serving children and families.

Over the course of these hearings the focus has been on the management, quality, and responsiveness to the court stipulations incorporated in the exit plan for the Juan F. lawsuit regarding children and youth in the care of DCF. This lawsuit drives the work of the agency and demands enormous energy, time, and resources.

The Commission would like to offer, for your consideration, a new framework for determining the goals, objectives, and performance measures of the Department. In these times of scarce and shrinking resources, how can we rethink, reinvigorate, and reallocate resources for better outcomes for children and families?

Recommendations

We recommend adopting a strength-based approach aimed at getting the following result:

Families will have the skills, knowledge and resources to raise emotionally and physically healthy children.

Here are the steps to that approach.

A. Prioritize prevention services

The law authorizing the Department of Children and Families should be amended to include language that clearly prioritizes prevention and family support services in the community.

As the Program Review and Investigation Report cites, strategic attention has to be given to how the core functions of child welfare, safety, permanency and prevention interact and weave together. The current focus is primarily on the child protective services mandate, due largely to the ongoing impact of the federal Juan F. lawsuit. The new policy must adopt a results based accountability framework with clear population results statements that can be measured. This would move from crisis response to a proactive approach with services provided in a relational, strength based approach. Adopt the following mission and guiding principles for serving families:

Mission statement: To develop a comprehensive, coordinated, efficient, and effective family-focused system of policies, practices, and services for families that assists parents.

Guiding principles:

Families are assured opportunities that foster optimal development in a safe, stable and nurturing environment that builds on individuals' and families strength;
Families are supported to be self-reliant to the best of their abilities;
Families are empowered to participate in the larger community.

-- From Task Force on Families with Cognitive Delays

Note: Current DCF budget allocated to prevention v. residential is a 5:1 ratio- approximately \$40 million total for family support services, psychiatric clinics for children, community based prevention services, and family preservation services v. \$216 million for room and board in residential institutions.

B. Collaborate with state and local partners

This will demand that DCF plan in partnership with key state agencies that provide services to Families. DCF reports that 91 percent of the cases they investigate are neglect cases, and over 80 percent are repeat cases, and a majority is related to poverty. In order to be effective, DCF must analyze regional economic, social and cultural factors including population trends and income levels of families in each region to fully understand the demographics and unique needs of families. This will enable the Department to plan proactively with key agencies and local partners to meet the needs of families and children. They must work with DSS, DPH, the Children's Trust Fund, and other agencies to look at resources and community supports available. They must see themselves as building communities in partnership with families and communities and

work in collaboration. This will maximize resources and hold all service providers accountable for results. DCF cannot do this work alone.

DCF should look to the blueprint for a comprehensive birth to nine system adopted by the Governor's Cabinet in its Report, Ready by Five: Fine by Nine and the infant toddler plan, First Words First Steps. These documents are based on sound research and evidence practice as to what families need to raise children. The focus is on prevention, early intervention and continuous support services. It calls for major system reforms in how agencies plan, and implement grants and community contracts. All would be held accountable for outcomes.

For example, seven state agencies developed a Memorandum of Understanding to partner together to respond to a federal grant to establish an early mental health intervention system in conjunction with the City of New Haven. Known as Project Launch, the grant application centered on replication of a researched based, holistic children's system of care model developed by Dr. Darcy Lowell, Bridgeport Hospital.

The system brings the resources of the community together to maximize efficiency and establishes formal agreements with providers to prevent duplication, gaps and inefficiencies. The cost for this intensive home based intervention, is approximately \$5,000 per family of four, compared to \$850,000 for one year of psychiatric hospitalization for a single child. Attached find information on CHILD First. Using health and mental dollars, home visitation dollars and safety net dollars in a family focused support system will strengthen families, ensure age appropriate child develop milestones are met, including language development, and begin to address the current disproportionate number of children of color in DCF care.

C. Make implementation of Differential Response a top priority for early intervention

Families are in stress. Poverty is the underlying cause of many of the neglect charges against families. We recognize the importance of the new Differential Response Initiative that looks to identify the risk factors and root cause of some of the problems facing families and believe this should be a priority for funding implementation. This should be seen as an early intervention system for families and work as an integral part of the CHILD First primary prevention system. They will work together to form a continuum of services depending on family need.

D. Accountability and Outcomes

What would a system of accountability really look like? The Department is in the process of developing a strategic plan. The draft plan demonstrates a willingness to re-think priorities, especially as it relates to primary prevention. Recurrent themes are: culture change; gender specific services; staff qualifications; oversight; contract compliance; and

other activities related to the responsibilities of the agency. The plan focuses on the system and providers, but without a clear set of outcomes for children and families. Setting clear family and child outcomes will help prioritize and focus resources and assist DCF in implementation of the strategic plan.

For example, recent significant policy changes in Family with Service Needs and the Juvenile Justice system demonstrate that collaboration with the legislature in developing new policy direction does work. Youth are being served in communities; and services are now based on research and sound child and adolescent behavioral science. Court Support Services Division (CSSD) of the Judicial Branch and DCF forged a collaborative working relationship and now share data, practice and resources. At a recent meeting of the Task Force on Families with Service Needs, both DCF and CSSD reported on significant changes in serving youth focused on building relationships and ongoing supports rather than the traditional model of detention and incarceration. This is working.

The Department of Children and Families must use its resources and expertise to play a leadership role in working cross sector to rebuild communities that embrace families and create safe, secure, nurturing environments for children to thrive.

Each one of these recommendations needs to be fleshed out and incorporated into the DCF strategic plan. The Commission looks forward to working with DCF and the legislature to achieve the results we all desire for Connecticut's children and families.