



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman
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Senator Musto, Representative Urban, and members of the Committee. My name is Elaine Zimmerman and I am the Executive Director for the Commission on Children. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning in support of Raised Bill 6486, An Act Concerning Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families and House Bill 5144, An Act Concerning An Appropriation to Expand the Nurturing Families Network.

H.B. 6486, An Act Concerning Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families

The bill before you seeks to address a systemic problem facing society of fatherlessness. "Fatherlessness" is a complex social issue and there is a great deal of debate about the causes and remedies. However, there is no debate that strong families and communities are essential elements for providing a secure future for children. When both mother and father are positively and actively engaged in a child's life by providing financial support, love, guidance, and discipline, every child has a better chance of success. Within that context, the science of brain development and overall social, emotional and physical health of children depends on the interaction of caring, competent parents and caregivers. Research points to the fact that children with absent fathers are more likely to drop out of school, become teenage parents, develop drug or alcohol problems, or become involved in violent criminal behavior.

The Commission commends the leadership of Representative Morris and Senator LeBeau for convening the Fatherhood Task Force. It has been 10 years since Representative John Martinez embraced fatherhood policy for the state and established the Fatherhood Council to bring all three branches of government together to commit to promoting positive fatherhood and better child outcomes. Since then progress has been made in investment in fatherhood programs that provide support, education, job training and parenting classes to dads throughout Connecticut.

The Task Force provides an opportunity to reinvigorate efforts on behalf of families and children. The Task Force heard from parents, child development experts, Judicial Branch leaders, and national experts who provided testimony on the important role of fatherhood.

Fatherhood activist and actor-comedian Bill Cosby provided riveting testimony on the impact of fatherlessness on the minority community. He called for a major culture change to embrace responsible parenting. Too many of our children go to bed without the hug of a father.

The bill before seeks to establish public policies that will promote positive father involvement and address some of the system barriers to achieving this goal.

Section 1: Directs the Chief Court Administrator to establish a Problem Solving Court. This approach authorizes the court to incorporate into court proceedings the ability to work with non-custodial parents, both mothers and fathers, to address the root causes for non-compliance with child support orders. This model, developed by the National Center for Court Innovation, successfully helps parents to address issues such as lack of education, increase parenting skills, work on legal issues, help with co-parenting and overall case management to do what it takes to end the cycle of court involvement. Under the leadership of the Judicial Branch, a committee is now exploring this model and the legislation will provide the necessary legal imprimatur to assist in the establishment of Problem Solving Courts in Connecticut.

The Commission is working with Representative Bruce Morris and the Judicial Branch on substitute language for this section that will clarify that the goal is to authorize the Judicial Branch to establish Problem Solving Court as a system wide practice in dealing with child support cases where these barriers to payment exist.

Section 2: Under the leadership of the 2003 General Assembly, Connecticut instituted an arrears management program and charged the Department of Social Services with promulgating regulations for its implementation. Since its inception, fewer than ten (10) residents have qualified to participate in the arrears management program due to the complicated nature of the eligibility guidelines and administrative procedures.

This section seeks to require DSS to report on its current arrear management program. It also “caps” arrears in excess of five hundred dollars for noncustodial parents living at or below the federal poverty level – a promising practice that evolved in New York.

The Commission would also recommend consideration of requiring the Commissioner of DSS to expand the number of fatherhood programs participating in the arrears management program and to streamline the application and approval process to bring the program closer to its legislative intent.

Section 3b: Requires DSS to report on its efforts to reduce teen fatherhood and the number of noncustodial parents participating in job training and the number becoming employed.

Focusing on prevention is a smart investment and assisting non-custodial parents in securing employment will lead to more stable child support income. Two common-sense measures that begin with asking DSS to report on the current status of these efforts.

Section 3c: Directs DSS to utilize federal funds for these purposes if funds become available.

Clearly, government alone cannot reverse the growing trend of father absence. However, government can enact policies and fund programs that help reduce the number of young men who become teen parents and encourage active participation by fathers of all ages in raising their children. We encourage passage of AAC Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families as it supports these basic tenets, builds off existing resources and aligns our work the federal “Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act” expected to be reintroduced by the Obama Administration.

H.B. 5144, An Act Concerning An Appropriation to Expand the Nurturing Families Network

The Commission’s work on behalf of children focuses on primary prevention- what does the science of brain development and child youth development research tell us about what children need from birth to age 21 in order to achieve optimal health and development. The Commission has championed legislation to move state budget expenditures from crisis spending to prevention. The bill before you represents a sound investment in primary prevention. The Nurturing Families Network works successfully with families to prevent child abuse and neglect, but does so in a positive framework by providing guidance and training to ensure parents have the skills and knowledge to be competent, caring parents. The Commission support expansion of this program and believes there is a opportunity with the new Obama Administration to claim certain home visitation functions in the Nurturing Families Program in the Medicaid Program. This would provide the necessary funding to expand the program if the dollars were reinvested in this program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning.