



State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



**Commission on Children**

**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman  
Executive Director  
Connecticut Commission on Children**

**Appropriations Committee  
Connecticut General Assembly  
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Senator Prague, Representative Hamm, Representative Villano, and members of the Committee:

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children and am joined by our Chair, Dr. M. Alex Geertsma, pediatrician and Chair of Pediatrics at St. Mary's Hospital.

The General Assembly created the Commission on Children through Section 46a-126 of the General Statutes with bipartisan support. We are mandated to bring together the three branches of state government with the private sector to design and advance public policies in the best interest of children.

In our work, we 1) develop landmark policies for children, 2) bring dollars and donated skills to the state, 3) lead in public information for children and youth, 4) perform key research on children's needs, 5) bring the family to government and government to the family, and 6) are recognized as the best coordinating entity for children in the nation. This costs the state \$1.30 per child.

**Backdrop**

The Commission has a history of finding the problem, bringing in the experts and the customers, driving public policy, and focusing media attention on issues affecting children. We insist on civic engagement in all we do, with a focus on the family. Our agency has worked closely with you, guiding initiatives on school readiness, early reading, child poverty reduction, bullying, after-school programs, federal funds maximization, lead abatement, fatherhood, toy safety, parent leadership, child nutrition, and obesity reduction, to name a few.

The Commission speaks for children. We galvanize resources, constituents and unexpected stakeholders to make sure children thrive.

## **Children and the Recession**

Children historically are lost in hard times. The recession is anticipated to cause three million more children to fall into poverty, which will trigger \$1.7 trillion in long-term losses to the U.S. economy. In Connecticut, more than one-quarter of those using food pantries are working families. More than 100,000 children under 12 years of age are at risk of hunger.

Already we are hearing signs of this in our state. The school teachers in Waterbury report more children coming to school tired and stressed. In Willimantic, they cannot keep up with the number of children who need to be transported to school who have moved into homeless shelters. The school nurses in Stamford are so concerned about children's hunger that they are organizing WIC and food stamp signups.

We will be traveling the state speaking to families to learn what they need in these times. We will speak to youth to make sure they are not left out and participate in helping. They need to be leaders now.

The Commission has already drafted legislation with the Select Committee on Children to ensure the strongest protections for children during this fiscal crisis. We are also working with leaders in Washington, D.C., to make sure our state takes every opportunity and identifies every dollar that might assist our children.

The last two recessions reveal that children stay poor for five to seven more years after a recession ends. Children who fall into poverty now will not recover when the economy recovers. What we do now will influence nearly a decade of children's lives. This is not the time to cut out the agency that promotes their health, safety, and learning.

## **The Commission performs the following functions:**

### **Model policy design**

- We assess what is and is not working for children, looking at outcomes and working with families and experts throughout the state. We staff legislators concerned about key child and family issues and determine research-based policies that address gaps. To date this has included areas such as anti-bullying, child poverty reduction, lead abatement, child obesity, after school, federal funds maximization, the particular needs of infants and toddlers, and ways to bring absent fathers back home to their children.

### **Accountants on cost effectiveness**

- We designed our state's return-on-investment document, *A Children's Stock Portfolio*, which is in your packets. This was prepared well before this recession to advise you on what is cost effective and successful for children. This was not done based on other states. It is a state return on investment specifically for Connecticut.

## **Innovators**

- We innovate new practice where the gap is too large and nothing has filled it. When it was clear that families were not part of government and government did not reach families, we designed the first family civics initiative for parents in the country, called the Parent Leadership Training Institute. This initiative gives parents the tools and confidence to be voices for children in their schools, communities and state. Over the past decade, PLTI graduates have generated \$1.1 million in volunteer time in our state.

## **Scholars on best research and practices**

For example, we analyzed:

- The impact of both 9/11 and Katrina on the children in our state. This research went national as the most in-depth study of natural and unnatural disaster on children. It was used by Congress and in our state led to the only legislation in the nation on children and unnatural disaster.
- How long children were waiting in foster care for adoption. These findings propelled our state's comprehensive adoption law.
- The impact of racial integration in the early years on children's notion and acceptance of difference. This facilitated integrated early preschool programming.
- The impact of school readiness in the kindergarten classroom. This study became the basis for our current analysis of preschool programs.

## **Agents of trend analysis and results-based accountability**

We have been analyzing trends and bringing them to you for 15 years in *The Social State of Connecticut*, which we created with then-Senator John Larson. It stems from the first law in the country to require a review of the state's social health as a measure of quality of life for our families. This "social health index" became a civic tool for the public and policy leaders to see what is and is not working over a 30-year trend line among 11 quality-of-life indicators. The William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund has been a partner with us on this public venture.

The current social health index is in your packet. It shows you, among eleven indicators, very high racial and ethnic disparities, more young children committing suicide, very high dropout rates in our cities, a decline in low birth weight and an increase in hate crimes. This is very troubling as the recession cuts into resources that meet these needs. The Index is followed by a special section on youth. This section is in its second year and is funded by the Tow Foundation.

## **Fundraisers for the state**

The Commission brings in three dollars conservatively for every dollar invested in the Commission. We take every opportunity to inform you of federal financing opportunities as well

as raising dollars to bring to agencies. These dollars do not come to our agency. They go to other state agencies and towns.

Recent examples of funding brought in and potential funding on the way include:

- TANF contingency fund -- valued at \$18 million
- Lead abatement grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) -- \$8 million
- Home visitation in Medicaid – valued at \$7 million
- FSET 50/50 match funds -- valued at \$2-3 million
- After school coordination -- \$500,000
- *Playbook for Prevention* -- \$500,000
- Parent engagement -- \$200,000
- Urban issues and children - \$130,000
- Social State of Connecticut -- \$40,000 match

Other state agencies are not as responsive to the available opportunities. While we wait for executive branch action on FSET that should have been taken last June, Connecticut continues to receive \$0 through the FSET 50/50 program. In contrast, New York state brings in \$100 million annually, and is working to expand that amount. It was the Commission on Children that identified this untapped federal resource for poverty reduction in local communities.

The Office of Health Care Access reports that our state spent \$195 million in hospitalizations for low birth-weight babies. Research tells us that this would be significantly decreased if we provided WIC for pregnant mothers in their last twenty-four weeks of pregnancy. We have just shared this information with legislative leaders, and there will be a rapid RBA plan to reverse this trend.

We are working now on the federal stimulus package with the National Conference of State Legislatures and are providing information on all the incentive opportunities and billing opportunities for which we are eligible to garner federal funds.

### **Leaders on prevention rather than crisis**

We wrote the cutting-edge bill on prevention with the Speaker that shifts our budget from crisis to prevention for children and requires the Governor to give a report on prevention spending in her State of the State address.

We have led on prevention, rather than crisis, as a way to work with all children and youth in this state. It offers dignity, cost savings and true outcomes. Other states are replicating this strategy.

We studied how to talk about prevention most effectively – and designed a major Game Plan on Prevention with Coach Calhoun. This was on television, radio, print-all from dollars we raised. The *Playbook for Prevention* is a best seller for the state, at no cost to you. It is in your packets.

Ironically the Governor in her budget states that we provide the same function as DCF. This is far from the truth. That is like saying the pediatrician performs the same function as the emergency room doctor.

### **We serve as the bridge between the community, family, and the state**

The Commission averages 350 calls per week from local citizens and parents. We average 800 visits on our website per week. State and local policy leaders utilize our agency approximately 30 times per week.

We distribute over 180 products per day to the public on children's development. This ranges from products for every new parent in hospitals, in both English and Spanish, to t-shirts with immunization schedules, to booklets on the importance of reading to children. Our products are also used in other states due to their clarity, access and art designs.

Statewide, we partner with mayors on children's issues, reach youth and parents, work with grandparents, help the librarians, partner with youth service bureaus and work with the police.

### **Partners with you, as well as Congress**

We staff you on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states. These include school readiness, the Parent Trust Act, Homeland Security and Children Act, and the FSET 50/50 match law bringing dollars into our state in a match of 50 cents to the dollar.

We have worked extensively with our Congressional delegation on early brain research, school readiness, early reading, homeland security and children, and the stimulus package. All to help our state's children.

Rep. Heinrich pointed out in the Appropriations Hearing last week that perhaps people don't know of the good work of the commissions. She's right. We staff and bring the product to you. It is yours. At no point do we focus on advertising our own agency. The sole outcome of the Commission is children's success and your success in leading for them.

So at times like this we are an easy target. Though an odd target, as we are less than half of one percent of the total budget. Sometimes it is easier to wipe out a small agency in its entirety than to delve into larger agencies to look for efficiency or to explore revenue generation. Often however, those small agencies are the most efficient operations around.

## **Staffing**

We made a commitment to build this agency up so that you have the most exceptional staff for your child planning and child policy needs. This includes a former staff member of the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families under Congressman George Miller and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder; the former editor of *Weekly Reader*; the former head of the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic; a former news reporter and editor from a reputable daily newspaper; a former legislator; and a former chief of staff in the executive branch. We have three bilingual staff members to reach growing populations in our state. I myself was chief of staff for all of family policy for the state of California under Speaker Willie Brown and staff to the human services committee on child care, poverty reduction and all of human services.

These combined staff skills lead to exceptional research, outstanding products, consumer design that truly reaches the public across educational level, high acumen in public policy, strategic sense, and an understanding of each branch of government and the community.

We are proud of building this for you and hope that this leads to those of you who do not use the agency as much as you might, using it more rather than paring it down. We are at your service.

## **Consolidation?**

Consolidating the commissions is like a poorly built Noah's Ark—two of this and two of that. There are no two children. When there has been a national or international crisis, people save the children. They don't just take two or they will have no future or adults, for that matter.

Children are not a special interest group. They are a stage of life that every person in our state has gone through or will go through. They are our next adults and workers. Thousands of these children and youth need an entity representing them. But they cannot vote and have no voice up here. Fifty percent of our workforce will come from the urban sector by 2020. Currently, 50 percent of our youth in the urban sector are not graduating from high school.

We are glad to work with you on innovative solutions that address efficiency and budget decreases without a form of consolidation that risks failing all sectors.

## **Summary**

Thank you. We hope to keep working for you and the 800,000 children and their families that depend on us. We will continue to give you a proven return on investment.