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Good Afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and the Joint Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Mary Willis. I am the Director of the Mayor's Youth Services Bureau for the City of Stamford and a Board Member of the Connecticut Youth Services Association. I am here to provide testimony in support of Bill #5676 An Act Concerning Children of Families with Service Needs.

First I would like to recommend that the language of the bill, specifically Section 2 paragraph b, be changed from "CSSD shall contract with private providers" to "CSSD shall contract with private providers and Youth Services Bureau with an established Juvenile Review Board". As Mr. Montes stated, as the language is currently written, most Youth Services Bureaus would not be eligible to apply.

Stamford developed a Juvenile Review Board, a program similar to the Family Support Center, in October of 2005 and has served over 100 youth and families since that time. The mission of the JRB is to offer juveniles a community based positive alternative to the juvenile justice system through personal responsibility and accountability, intervening in a variety of ways to prevent future crimes and restoring relationships with victims.

In February 2006 we followed up with 71 of the youth who had successfully completed the JRB requirements and only 3% had recidivated compared to the statewide recidivism rate for first time non violent offenders which is 25%. The JRB model is working for the youth of our community!

The JRB serves first time non violent offenders, truancy, FWSN and YIC cases. At this time, the only FWSN cases we can see are those that are first time offenses. A Family Support Center would allow us to expand the pool of the youth that we serve. I also believe that families will be more likely to ask for the support they need if they have the opportunity to do so with a community based organization instead of Juvenile Court.

Typical interventions that we provide through the JRB include mental health services, substance abuse services, tutoring, mentoring, mediation, restitution, after school programming, letters of apology to their family and/or the victim, essays related to the reason for the arrest and weekly contact with their case manager.

My role as the YSB Director is to be educated on all the services offered in our community for youth and families and to ensure that those services are of the highest quality. In the ten years in my position with the Mayor's office and my previous experience with a community based organization serving youth, I have developed strong, positive relationships with many, if not all, of the providers of youth services in Stamford. This expertise and experience makes our Youth Services Bureau an ideal candidate for developing a Family Support Center in Stamford.

There are several other collaboratives that would support and strengthen our ability to provide quality services to Families with Service Needs including the Stamford Out of School Time Alliance which involves over 60 out of school time providers who meet monthly to share information, ideas and best practices.

So I echo the sentiments of my colleague when I say that Youth Services Bureaus are the ideal organization to look to when considering the funding of Family Support Centers. We have many, many years of experience supporting the youth and families of our communities with wraparound services as is being recommended by HB 5676.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

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