

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

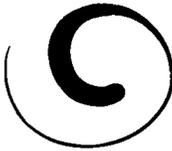
**Written Testimony of Maria Morelli-Wolfe in Support of S.B. 7037, An Act  
Expanding the Subsidized Guardianship Program  
to Siblings of Children Living with Relatives**

I am Maria Morelli-Wolfe, an attorney with Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc., where I have represented low-income children and their families for nine years in the areas of child protection, education, and public benefits law. I respectfully urge the Committee to support S.B. 7037, which would allow the caretaker of related children and their half or step siblings, biologically unrelated to the caregiver, to receive a guardianship subsidy from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) for all of the children.

In some circumstances, caretakers may accept into their home children unrelated to them, but related to the children already in their care, to whom the caretaker is related. For example, a paternal aunt may assume the care of her brother's daughter and son (i.e., her biological niece and nephew) and also the niece and nephew's half-siblings (sharing the same mother but not father) in an effort to keep the sibling group together. These unrelated children are often placed by DCF with this biologically unrelated caretaker through either a foster placement or a special study license. The placement of these unrelated children into the same home as their half and step siblings is laudable for maintaining the sibling unit. Current subsidized guardianship program rules, however, overlook these valuable family and placement configurations.

Under current law, only caretakers who are biologically related to a child within three generations are eligible for a DCF guardianship subsidy. The subsidy to the caretaker relative equals the amount of the monthly foster payment, minus any other income to the child, and ranges between \$678 and \$834 per month. Caretakers of the half and step siblings of their biologically nieces, nephews or grandchildren, are categorically ineligible for the guardianship subsidy for the unrelated children.

The only financial assistance available to the caretaker for the unrelated children is Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) through the Department of Social Services (DSS). The caretaker has two options for receipt of TFA. The first option involves the caretaker receiving assistance for the child only. In the Hartford area, the grant for the first child is only \$333 per month, with each additional child increasing the grant by only \$90-110. The second option is where the caretaker chooses to be a part of the assistance unit in order to increase the monthly grant (e.g., an assistance unit of two in Hartford receives \$443 per month), but the caretaker will then be subject to TFA's work participation and time limit rules. In any event, the TFA amount for an assistance unit of one is roughly one-half the DCF guardianship subsidy per month per child.



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This discrepancy in available benefits, based on the categorical exclusion of non-related caretakers from the DCF guardianship subsidy, should be remedied, thereby acknowledging the complexity of family structure, actual DCF placement practices, and the identical caregiving role played by these non-related caretakers. Without eligibility for the guardianship subsidy, some caretakers may not be willing or able to accept guardianship of the half or step siblings of their related family members. These half or step siblings may be separated from their siblings and placed in other foster homes. Or, these children may remain in the home of their half and step siblings as foster children, while the caretaker accepts legal guardianship of their siblings (those related to the caregiver) illogically allowing only part of the sibling group to move out of the foster care system into greater permanence. Financial parity should be accorded to these caretakers who out of kindness openly accept half and step siblings of their family members into their home as their extended, albeit biologically unrelated, family. Extending the guardianship subsidy will grant these complex families greater financial stability and much needed, and equally deserving, permanency to the half and step siblings.

In light of the above, I respectfully urge the Committee to support S.B. 7037 to expand eligibility for the DCF guardianship subsidy to cover the unrelated half and step sibling of children related to the caretaker. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.

Prepared by:

Maria Morelli-Wolfe  
Greater Hartford Legal Aid  
860-541-5042