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Testimony to Education Committee
Regarding HB 7177

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Good afternoon members of the Education Committee. My name is Mindy Gates. I am the Director of the JP Vincent Family Resource Center in Bloomfield, co-chair of the Evaluation Committee of the statewide Family Resource Center Alliance and a member of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance. I would like to first state that I am in support of the Governor's proposed early childhood investments for the upcoming biennium. As we all know, funding for early care and education experiences will have a significant return on investment for our state as well as a positive impact for families.

When Dr. Edward Zigler, Professor of Human Development at Yale University, spoke here at an Infant/Toddler Forum in November, he said there are two policy decisions our state can make now to ensure that all children are ready for school: invest in preschool, and invest in a home visitation program for infants and toddlers such as the Parents As Teacher Program. I am here today to testify on the second of these two, which is represented in HB 7177, An Act Concerning Family Resource Centers.

There are 62 Family Resource Centers (FRCs) in Connecticut funded under the Department of Education. Our Centers provide a variety of services to families in the schools and communities in which we are located. One of the programs that all FRCs implement is the Parents As Teachers (PAT) program. PAT is a parent education and family support program that supports families from the prenatal period to their children reach age five. It is a research-based program that utilizes reliable and current research in the areas of child development and neuroscience to empower parents to give their children the best start in life. Today I would like to share with you some information and research that will demonstrate the need for expansion of the Parents As Teachers Program at Family Resource Centers in the state.

To begin with, there are four program components to the Parents As Teachers model: personal visits, playgroups, child assessment, and resource and referral. Together, these components allow FRCs to offer the information, support and encouragement families need to help young children grow and develop to reach their optimal potential. Here is a brief description of each of these components:

PLAYGROUPS - Parents and children come together for learning and fun. Parents share common concerns and gain new insight while their children practice school readiness skills such as socialization, problem solving, communication, and more.

PERSONAL VISITS - Certified Parent Educators provide one-on-one visits with parents and children in which personalized instruction is offered to parents using the

Parents As Teachers curriculum. Personal visits may take place in the family home or in the Family Resource Center.

EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT - Periodic screenings, or assessments, are used to track children's overall development in communication, motor, intellectual and social domains. Early detection of a developmental delay often helps to prevent later difficulties in school. The screenings can also be used as a tool to direct play and activities for children to areas in which they can build their skills.

RESOURCE AND REFERRAL –Referral services help families find the resources they are looking for and links them with community services in the community. Resources are available at FRCs to assist families with specific questions on child development, parenting, and other concerns.

National studies as well as reviews of Connecticut FRC programs show that families who participate in the PAT program gain knowledge about child development, increase their confidence in parenting, and become more connected in the community to resources and services. In addition, this program has been instrumental in early identification of many children with developmental delays and referring them for needed services such as the state's Birth to Three.

A pilot evaluation project was conducted in the Spring of 2007 in which sixteen Connecticut FRC sites participated. A total of 243 parents responded to the survey. Results from the analysis of the data showed that there were statistically significant gains by parents in reaching the two core goals of the program which are to increase parent's knowledge of child development and child rearing practices and increase parent's competence and confidence in parenting skills. While the study was not extensive enough to establish whether participation in FRC's PAT programs were responsible for the improvements, anecdotal evidence from our programs in the state support the fact that our programs are making a difference for families. Below are two quotes from parents in response to questions in a narrative part of the survey:

- When participants were asked how PAT has affected the way they parent, one parent responded: "I feel I have a larger repertoire of ideas and strategies to use with my children. If I have a concern with one of my children, I know I have somewhere to go for advice and support."
- When participants were asked what they would tell another parent enrolling in the program, one parent responded, "I would tell a parent that it has been a wonderful experience. I have not only made what I consider to be lifelong friendships, but my son has greatly improved his interactions with peers. It has also been tremendously helpful to have warm and knowledgeable staff who are approachable."

Several larger scale evaluations of the Parents As Teachers Program have been conducted throughout the country. In addition to the two outcomes described above, according to the PAT National Center, results from these studies also show the following impact of the program on families:

- PAT Parents engage in more language- and literacy- promoting behaviors with their children.
- PAT parents are more involved in their children's schooling.
- PAT children at age 3 are more advanced than comparison children in language, problem solving, and other cognitive abilities, and social development.
- PAT children score higher on kindergarten readiness tests and on standardized measures of reading, math and language in first through fourth grades.

Further evaluating the impact of Connecticut FRCs and in particular, our PAT program, is necessary in order for us to establish the full extent impact we are having on these outcomes for children and families. And funding for expansion of our program is essential for us to reach all the families in need in our communities.

When implemented in a quality way, Parents As Teachers is an effective program that helps many families. Please support HB 7177 in favor of adding to the number of families serviced by the PAT Program in Connecticut.

