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## TESTIMONY OF JEANNE MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE

March 11, 2008

Good Morning Senator Harris, Representative Villano, and members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and share my concerns regarding Raised Bill Number 5908, An Act Concerning Proceedings And Operations Of The Department Of Children And Families.

As you know, my role is to provide oversight of state-funded services to children. My office receives countless calls, letters, and emails regarding concerns and complaints from parents, grandparents, other relatives, foster parents, children, and providers. To determine whether and what action should be taken, each concern or complaint is reviewed. This may include contacts with providers, relatives, and caretakers as well as review of DCF, court, medical, mental health, and other provider records. In addition, my staff receives and reviews a variety of information from DCF on a daily basis. I and my staff have regular communication with the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, and Bureau Chiefs and Area Office Directors. As a result of all of our work, we are intimately familiar with the policies, procedures, and practices of the Department.

Our work tells us that engaging families is a critical component to successful intervention. This includes parents and grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, other relatives, and foster parents. It is critical that DCF reach out to relatives as early as possible, help families understand and engage in the process, and nurture positive relationships between adults who are important to the child, including not only blood relatives but also extended family, foster families, coaches and teachers. While DCF continues to struggle in this regard, I am very concerned with creating a presumption, as this bill proposes, that placement with grandparents or other relatives is in the best interest of the child. Decisions about placement of children who have been removed from their homes are complex. Every decision about placement and services must be an individualized decision based upon all of the information available and, most importantly, on a current assessment of the child's strengths and needs and the capacity of potential caregivers. Rather than creating a presumption that any particular type of placement is in the best interest of children, I urge you to continue your work to infuse results based accountability into the infrastructure of DCF.

I urge you to take the same action with regard to Sections 1 and 2 of Raised Bill No 5908, which would require notice to a municipality prior to a change in use of a facility previously operated by the Department of Children and Families and that contracts for the operation of residential facilities to contain provisions to require providers to comply with any state statute, regulation and local ordinance concerning the safety of residents and noise levels.

The "DCF Monitoring and Evaluation" report ("PRIC Report"), issued in December 2007, is critical to our collective understanding of the functioning of the Department of Children and Families. The findings and recommendations are extensive. A number of findings are of significant concern and relevant to Sections 1 and 2 of the bill before you. They are:

- While there are pockets of strength regarding quality assurance, there are also major gaps including ineffective use of findings from internal and external evaluations and no compilation or comparison of results data from all sources. (p. 147)
- Performance-based contracting is ineffective: expectations are not explicit; where expectations are explicit, data is sometimes not submitted by the provider; and there is little accountability and knowledge of whether a provider is meeting contract expectations and rarely consequences when they do not. (p. 160-161)
- DCF monitoring of providers and implementation of contract requirements is haphazard at best, often relying on the interest and time available of the program lead, ranging from conscientious to vacant position. (p. 167)

The findings and recommendations are consistent with the findings and recommendations in numerous reports issued by the Child Advocate over many years. These findings speak not only to the need for DCF to clearly set out expectations for providers and staff but also the need to improve DCF's internal quality assurance activities, improve responsiveness to internal and external investigations and evaluations, to develop and implement a meaningful strategic plan, and to integrate the work of the various bureaus.

As a consolidated children's agency, DCF's mandates are broad and far-reaching. While its mandate to care for and protect children who are abused and neglected is most often highlighted, DCF is equally mandated to serve as the lead mental health and juvenile justice agency for all of Connecticut's children. DCF also is responsible for leadership related to prevention initiatives. I am concerned that Sections 1 and 2, as currently drafted, may have the unintended consequence of hampering DCF's ability to respond to the variety of needs of the children and families it serves without bringing us any closer to results based accountability. It is my hope that any legislation regarding facilities operated by DCF will focus on the quality of care provided to the children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.