

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law
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TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY AND MARTHA STONE, CO-CHAIR, FWSN ADVISORY BOARD IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 5926, AN ACT CONCERNING FAMILIES WITH SERVICE NEEDS

March 17, 2008

This testimony is submitted on behalf of Martha Stone, the Co-Chair of the Families with Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board, and Emily Breon, a member of its Truancy Subcommittee. The FWSN Advisory Board was created by section 42 of Public Act 06-188 and addresses issues relating to juvenile status offenders including truants. The FWSN Advisory Board created a Truancy Subcommittee and charged it with the development of recommendations related to services for truant youth in Connecticut. Martha Stone is also the Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy at the University of Connecticut School of Law where Emily Breon is a staff attorney.

We urge you to adopt Sections 1-3, 6,7, and 10,11 of Bill No. 5926 for the following reasons:

First, services to address truancy are desperately lacking. Even though the truant population comprises approximately half of all FWSN referrals in Connecticut, of which there were more than 4,000 last year, there is a dearth of services for truant youth. The few initiatives in Connecticut that target truancy are minimal and operate in relative isolation. While legislation¹ has been raised this session to provide services to the higher end FWSN population, such as runaways, there is a vacuum in services for truant youth. Raised Bill No. 5926 would fill that crucial void by establishing a pilot truancy reduction program that would provide grants to at least three, but not more than five, school districts with the greatest number of FWSN students. Districts who receive these grants must follow the recommendations of the FWSN Advisory Board and its Truancy Subcommittee. These recommendations provide general guidelines which provide guidance while also giving districts flexibility in determining the interventions that best fit their district's and community's needs.

Second, Sections 6 and 10 reflect a carefully crafted solution to the overwhelming problem of truancy. The proposed bill incorporates the unanimous recommendations which the FWSN Advisory Board's Truancy Subcommittee developed during nine months of deliberations and discussions around interventions for truant youth in Connecticut. It is important to emphasize that members of the Subcommittee embodied a diverse range of opinion, including representatives from local school districts, law enforcement,

¹ Raised Bill No. 342 would appropriate funds for the creation of additional Family Support Centers which serve "high-end" FWSN youth. This bill would provide necessary services to the "low-end" youth in the system.



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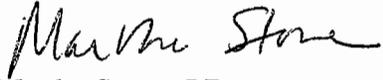
community-based agencies, the State Department of Education, the Judicial Department, Court Support Services Division, the Office of Policy and Management, and the Department of Children and Families. See FWSN Advisory Board Report February, 2008, p.66, (see <http://www.kidscounsel.org/Final%20FWSN%20Report%20Feb%202008.pdf>) During Subcommittee meetings, members reviewed national truancy intervention models as well as current truancy initiatives in Connecticut and, after careful and deliberate consideration, presented a list of recommendations for services for truant youth in Connecticut to the FWSN Advisory Board, which were unanimously adopted by the full Board.

Third, Sections 6 (d) and (e) contain crucial provisions that guarantee proper oversight and evaluation. The State Department of Education (SDE) will play a pivotal role in the truancy initiatives which this legislation would establish. The issue of truancy mandates the involvement of the educational system, since the root of truancy often lies, at least in part, within a child's relationship with school. While SDE has addressed truancy tangentially through its other initiatives, this bill enables truancy to be a focus of the department. SDE's involvement also ensures that the initiatives are a coordinated effort. Furthermore, the legislation includes funding for an evaluative component which is necessary in order to build a fund of knowledge regarding what works and what does not for this unique population in Connecticut. By calling for pilot programs to begin in only a few schools, the legislation will allow for an in-depth review of effectiveness. Finally, SDE will also work with the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance to ensure that findings from the pilot program are integrated into other state-wide efforts to improve school attendance.

Fourth, we also support Sections 1, 2, 7, and 11 of Raised Bill No. 5926 as they, like Sections 6 and 10, embody recommendations that the FWSN Advisory Board unanimously endorsed with one significant change. Sections 1 and 2 would implement important procedural changes to the FWSN laws (Sections 46b-148 and 149) which the FWSN Advisory Board agreed were necessary with one exception. The provision we recommended that FWSN diversion assessments not be used against the child, (amending 46b-129(j)) is missing from this bill and should be reinstated. Sections 7 and 11 would provide \$252,000 in grants to youth service bureaus with active juvenile review boards to enable the bureaus to provide additional services to FWSN children. Youth service bureaus around the state have proven to be successful in delivering services to children, and the FWSN Advisory Board agreed that it would be efficient and effective to support the bureaus so that the FWSN population could benefit from these services as well.

Based on the foregoing reasons, we urge you to pass sections 1-3, 6, 7, and 10,11 of Raised Bill No. 5926. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Martha Stone".

Martha Stone, J.D.

Co-Chair, FWSN Advisory Board

Executive Director, Center for Children's Advocacy

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily Breon".

Emily Breon, J.D., M.S.W.

Member, FWSN Advisory Board Truancy Subcommittee

Attorney, Team Child/Juvenile Justice Project, Center for Children's Advocacy