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**Testimony of Karen Foley-Schain, M. A., M. Ed.; LPC
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Raised Bill No. 666: An Act Concerning the Reduction of Child Poverty**

Good morning. My name is Linda Harris. I am a program director for the State of Connecticut's Children's Trust Fund.

I am here today to present testimony for Karen Foley-Schain, the Executive Director of the Trust Fund. I am here to testify on *Raised Bill No. 666: An Act Concerning the Reduction of Child Poverty*.

As I read the material, it quickly occurred to me just how similar the goals of this bill are with those of the Children's Trust Fund – that fathers play an active and important role in their children's lives and that mothers be given opportunities to succeed following the birth of their child.

I would like to comment on two sections of this bill – but first I would like to tell you just a bit about the Children's Trust Fund and its Nurturing Families Network.

As you may know, the Children's Trust Fund is an independent state agency. We fund community-based services that support families and ensure the positive growth and development of children.

Chief among these efforts is the Nurturing Families Network. The network is made up of 42 organizations across the state that provide screening, parenting groups and home visiting services. A list of the organizations is attached.

The Network supports parents across a broad spectrum of needs including education, employment, health care, housing, basic needs, parenting and child development. Research on the program shows that these efforts are making a real difference in the lives of the parents and children it serves.

The Nurturing Families Network will screen about 5,000 new parents this year, provide home visiting to services to roughly 1,500 poor and at risk families, and reach about 500 more through its group.

Positive Father Involvement

The bill calls for programs that encourage the positive involvement of fathers in raising their children. Engaging fathers in this type of effort is not without its challenges. Scheduling conflicts, the need for evening hours, fathers and children living in separate households, and cultural attitudes about parenting all create barriers to the full involvement of fathers.

However, despite these obstacles, the Nurturing Families Network has been successful in engaging a growing number of fathers in both its home visiting and group components.

For these fathers, the researchers have found the results to be positive, and noted that for some fathers the experience was transformative.

The fathers benefited from the expertise of the home visitor on child development and parenting. Further, the fathers valued the referrals they received from the home visitors and at times relied on their advice and counsel.

Perhaps most important, for this group of men, the home visitors were successful in showing them that they too could be active participants in their child's life.

As a result the Children's Trust Fund is proposing that the Human Services Committee include the Nurturing Families Network as a part of its strategy to support responsible fathering.

We would propose that in addition to offering grants to develop new programs, the Committee would provide funding to enhance the staffing of the Nurturing Families Network so that it can more fully involve fathers.

To do this we would strengthen our current efforts and develop a program component just for men – the fathers and other men who are important in the life of the child.

This component would be well integrated into the functioning of the NFN site – but would be different in several important ways – the staff would reach fathers who are not living with their children, have more evening hours and use curriculum and activities tailored to men.

We envision that this component would be largely staffed by men. This staff would make home visits, run parenting groups, organize field trips and activities for fathers and their children on the weekends ... all the while working on issues related to school, work, family dynamics and parent child interaction.

In NFN, where father involvement has been a key focus of the program, groups exclusively for dads are routinely offered and, at one site 25% of the home visitor caseload is made of fathers who have primary custody for their children.

Given the strong benefits of the program, the preponderance of evidence that children benefit when both parents are involved in their life, and the special challenge to integrating other men - boyfriends and step-parents - into family life we feel that it is important to enhance the program's capacity to more fully involve men.

Mothers and Work

The bill proposes a pilot program aimed at enhancing opportunities for mothers to succeed in the year immediately following the birth of their child. One million dollars would be allocated for this effort.

Over the past twelve years the Nurturing Families Network has worked with thousands of mothers at this time in their life. The mothers enrolled in the program have made important gains in education, employment, and in setting up independent households. They have taken hold of their responsibilities for their children and become better parents.

What they have accomplished has not been easy. There are gaps in services and barriers that make it difficult to get back to school or into the workforce.

Based on this, we recommend that the funding for this pilot program be used for some very specific purposes where there is a strong need and few services are available.

We would recommend that the funds be used to support:

- Quality infant care offered in the high schools.
- Educational assessment and vocational planning for parents with cognitive delays that do not meet the eligibility requirements for the services offered under the Department of Developmental Services.
- Community based mental health services for parents struggling with depression, post traumatic stress disorder or substance abuse that do meet the eligibility criteria for services offered under the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.
- Affordable, safe and adequate housing.

This type of investment would create practical solutions for parents in their local communities.

Thank you.