

Testimony of Gabriel Fonseca
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Prepared for the Human Services Committee
Public Hearing – Tuesday, March 11th at 10:30 a.m.
Proposed Bill No. 666 - An Act Concerning the Reduction of Child Poverty

Good Morning. My name is Gabe Fonseca, Program Manager of the Fatherhood Initiative at Madonna Place, a non-profit family support agency in Norwich.

I am here today to support section 1 of the proposed bill. Based on my experiences working with low-income fathers, I can honestly say they are in need of more services. Last year, our program worked with 120 men and 9 couples. We know there are more men who need supportive services because our case flow is constant. I support section 1 of this bill because it will bring much needed support to residents of our state. If this bill is tailored to allow programs like our Fatherhood Initiative, one that holds the prestigious John S. Martinez Award for Fatherhood Program Excellence and Children's Trust Fund access to additional funds it will have far reaching positive outcomes.

The experience of poverty and fatherlessness has lasting effects on children and adults. Research findings indicate that children from father-absent homes are five times more likely to live in poverty, 3 times more likely to fail in school, two to three times more likely to develop emotional and behavioral problems, and three times more likely to commit suicide. In addition, the main predictor of crime in a neighborhood is the percentage of homes without fathers.

Our program works with men and families in a strength based manner. We understand the systemic issues they face and we use a tactical approach. Our program is reviewed for father friendliness and we've earned certification status from DSS in 2004 and again in 2006. We are an established entity that has been proven to be effective. We help men establish economic stability, develop healthy marriages and relationships, and develop responsible and nurturing parenting skills.

Over the past two years, the fatherhood movement in CT has experienced advances and a few set backs. For example, DSS was awarded a Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grant through the federal government. These funds are allocated to each of the six certified sites. Having access to PRF funds enabled our program to greatly expand our services and add staff. The set back came in the form of each certified program experiencing PRF cuts to fund an additional site. As a result, programs like ours are left with a fiscal budget that does not fully support the work that needs to be done. Furthermore, DSS Fatherhood Initiative Program dollars were also cut leaving us with an

even larger budget cut. In short, our program has taken a huge step forward only to be forced to walk backward as time progresses with no additional funds.

I anticipate making ends meet during the upcoming year by aggressively seeking pay for services but such efforts will only act as band aids on an injury that requires stitches. We use braided funds from PRF, DSS, CTF, United Way, and community foundations to work with low-income families. Having the support of elected officials on a bill like this will keep the movement of fatherhood moving in a positive direction. This issue is non-partisan in nature and should have the support of those on all sides of the table.

If this bill is re-written to include DSS State Certified Fatherhood Programs and Children's Trust Fund the state could effectively provide a cohesive continuum of services that connects low income fathers to programs, resources and services. It could provide much needed grant funds to help existing certified programs continue while enabling CTF to advance in their service delivery. I support portions of section 1 of this bill because I agree that low-income fathers and families are in need of additional support. How do I know this? Because, I see them coming into our program daily. I hear their stories and see how poverty has impacted their ability to care for themselves and their children. I see them break down in a group full of other men when they realize they are just like their dad and I see them and their kids smiling when they make changes and begin spending quality time together.

In closing, poverty and fatherhood are multifaceted issues that require partnership based solutions. To most effectively work to reduce child poverty in our state it is wise to use the foundation that was established by pioneers like John S. Martinez. Mr. Martinez was a man that understood fatherhood and he worked hard to establish a unified movement in our state. That movement carries on through the work of state certified programs and through efforts of DSS, and CTF. I am confident that this body of elected officials will use good judgment and enact a policy that is cost effective and meets the complex needs of low-income fathers and children. In closing, I support any legislative efforts to increase the capacity of proven programs to reach more low-income fathers and families.

Thank-you for your concern.
