

**TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC.,  
IN SUPPORT OF HB 5699, AN ACT IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR  
CHILDREN UNDER THE CUSTODY, CARE OR SUPERVISION OF THE  
COMMISSIONER OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Good afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Catherine Williams and I am an attorney at Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). I am part of the Children at Risk Unit of CLS, which provides legal representation to low-income families who have children with disabilities, primarily to assist in obtaining access to special education and mental health services. Our work has also taken us into Juvenile and Probate court on behalf of our clients. Many of our clients who have mental illness or serious behavioral problems are also clients of the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

I am submitting this testimony in *support* of HB 5699, An Act Improving Outcomes for Children Under the Custody, Care or Supervision of the Commissioner of Children and Families.

HB 5699 adds needed judicial review of cases which have not had good outcomes. These cases frequently involve children with mental illness or serious behavioral issues because such children are difficult to serve and harder to place. In the past this has meant that services and placements for such children have frequently failed. I have one such client now who moved nearly 40 times in 14 years while in the care and custody of DCF. DCF's own records specify less than 20 moves during that time because hospital stays, shelters, interim placements, and returns to family when no placement is available are not considered a new placement. But for my client, whom I will call Barbara, they were all times when she had to pack her bags and meet a new set of folks who would be involved with her life. It frequently also meant she had to make a new set of friends at a new school. Although Barbara entered the care of DCF when she was only 4, permanency for her was never achieved.

HB 5699 Section 1(b) establishes particular trigger points at which the DCF must seek court review beyond the regular period of every 90 days established in Section 1(a). The trigger point identified in Section 1(b)(1), "more than two non emergency placements within a six month period" would have meant Barbara would have had judicial review of her case in the very first year she was in the care of the DCF. She was moved 6 times in less than a year. Shortly after she turned six years old, in her eighth move, she was placed with her sixth foster family.

HB 5699 Section 1(b)(2) would have helped Barbara as well as another client of CLS. That teenager lived in a shelter and slept on a mattress in a living room for months. In her 27<sup>th</sup> move Barbara was placed in a temporary shelter for children needing an immediate place to stay. She remained there for three months. Had HB 5699 been in effect at that time, the length of Barbara's stay in that shelter would have triggered a requirement for a judicial review of her case.

HB Section 1(b)(3) would have required an even earlier judicial review of Barbara's case as she was placed out of state in her 14<sup>th</sup> move. HB Section 1(b)(4) would also have ensured a judicial review of Barbara's case as she frequently changed schools in all her moves. Perhaps such a review would have led to a requirement that DCF make sure she at least had the consistency of attending the same school.

In addition, judicial review of Barbara's case after the first eighteen months in DCF's care if not yet in a permanent family residence, as provided under Section 1(b)(8) might have stemmed the tide of placements Barbara struggled through in her 14 years with the DCF. Review upon her sixteenth birthday, as provided under Section 1(b)(9) might have ensured better planning for her independence.

Lastly, DCF's record keeping system is so cumbersome that it requires a huge effort to become knowledgeable about a client's past, particularly if it has been involved and complex and there has been more than one case worker assigned to the case. The requirements in Section 1(d) should not only assist the judicial review, but provide the many case workers who become involved in a child's life with a quick reference tool to the upheavals in a the child's life as well as requiring a focus on the child's education. The attorneys in CLS' Children At Risk unit have found that consistency of educational placement and the educational progress of DCF's clients are frequently overlooked in the effort to deal with the clients' living situations. As result, the one comfortable place left in a child's life is often lost in the process and the critical aspect of the child's education – and future – is neglected. CLS, therefore, strongly support the provisions of Section (d) and particularly the requirement to focus on the child's educational history and progress.

In conclusion, Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. strongly encourages the Judiciary Committee to support **HB 5699 and its provisions aimed at improving outcomes for children under the custody, care or supervision of DCF.**

Thank you.

Catherine L. Williams