

STATE OF CONNECTICUT



OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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TESTIMONY JEANNE M. MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE
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Good afternoon to the members of the Appropriations Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to address the impact of the Governor's fiscal and statutory changes regarding the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA).

Since 1995, OCA has harnessed its unique statutory and independent authority to investigate and evaluate state-funded and state operated programs, services, and institutions for children and make recommendations to protect the rights of Connecticut's children. **The Governor's proposed fiscal and statutory changes effectively eliminate the independent oversight and accountability for state-funded services to children:**

- The Governor proposes to eliminate all staff positions at OCA except for the Child Advocate. Funding for the Child Advocate, in the amount of \$141, 000, would be transferred to the Office of the Attorney General.
- In conjunction with severe cuts in funding, the Governor, through Governor's Bill No. 839, proposes to eliminate the requirements that the Child Advocate periodically review: the procedures of state agencies, facilities and procedures of institutions, and the number of special needs children.
- The Governor's Bill No. 839 further proposes to eliminate the statutory authority of the Child Fatality Review Panel to investigate and issue reports and recommendations related to systemic failures following the death of a child. OCA staff provides staff support to the Panel. Between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2008, 532 unexplained or untimely child fatalities and fetal and infant deaths were reported to the Child Advocate and reviewed by staff. Of those, 146 cases were presented to the Child Fatality Review Panel for review.

I ask you to sustain the value of OCA as measured in the following ways:

- **OCA operates as the office of accountability for Connecticut's children and provides substantial short and long-term cost-savings to the taxpayers of Connecticut.** OCA's operating budget for 2008-2009 is \$918,014. The governor proposes to save \$777,014 by eliminating all but one position. Through the expenditure of \$777,014, OCA provides taxpayers with independent, nonpartisan accountability and oversight, by highly specialized and expert professionals, of well over \$4 billion dollars of state funds.

- **OCA brings it to the attention of the Governor, Legislature, Judicial Branch, and the public when the State and taxpayers do not get what they pay for in children’s facilities, programs and services.** Every day, through its statutory authority to investigate and access otherwise confidential information, OCA identifies ineffective, and in many cases, harmful expenditure of state funds for children’s facilities, programs and services. For example, Haddam Hills Academy, Connecticut Juvenile Training School, Lake Grove at Durham, Stonington Institute, Riverview Hospital, and St. Vincent’s Special Needs Services have all closed or undergone significant change due to OCA’s investigations.
- **OCA identifies costly and duplicative bureaucracy existing in state-run and state-funded agencies, facilities, programs and services for children.** In January 2009, OCA identified DCF’s plans to expend nearly \$600,000 in state funds for three new middle management positions despite a statewide agency hiring freeze and after a lengthy Legislative Investigative Hearing where hundreds of taxpayers, service providers and public officials testified on the ineffective expenditure of state funds by DCF and the need for an assessment of DCF leadership structure.
- **OCA has highly specialized and expert multidisciplinary staff to meet our statutory mandate.** OCA staff includes master’s level nurses with expertise in maternal and child health and the care of children with special health care needs; master’s level social workers with expertise in child development, child fatality investigation, and treatment of children with disabilities; attorneys experienced with child welfare, child health, and juvenile justice; and experts in facility oversight.
- **The Office of the Child Advocate is the safe haven for public officials, citizens, providers and state employees to report system failures that affect the health and safety of children.** In FY 2007-2008, OCA documented 465 telephone contacts. In addition to those contacts, OCA staff receive and act on reports of concerns made in the context of reviews and investigations of congregate care settings.

Connecticut families and children are profoundly impacted by the national and statewide fiscal crisis. As we move forward, state-funded programs, services, and facilities will need to provide more with significantly less resources. **Now, more than ever, the OCA’s independent authority and specialized expertise is necessary to ensure that these dollars are used effectively and responsibly to protect the rights of Connecticut’s children.**

I thank you for your past and future support.