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TESTIMONY

of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition

submitted to

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, February 18, 2009

The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to you today about the State Department of Social Services budget to the Appropriations Committee of the 2009 General Assembly.

We understand that these are very difficult economic times. The unemployment rate in Bridgeport reached double digits in December 2008, 10.1%, and is getting worse. We fully understand that the state budget must be cut. However, as the recession deepens, it is imperative that the state budget provide relief to those who are hardest hit by the severe economic downturn. President Obama has focused on financial and other supports for disadvantaged and low-income families as an important principle in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009. Connecticut should follow his example.

Medicaid and HUSKY

The Governor has proposed \$300 million in cuts to the HUSKY program. The savings include additional out-of-pocket costs for low-income parents and policy changes that will reduce enrollment. As a result of these proposed changes, children and their families will either not sign up for HUSKY even if they are eligible, lose coverage if they currently have it, or be unable to afford or access needed medical care. What is particularly disturbing is that these proposals are being recommended even as the federal government has increased Medicaid reimbursement to states under the economic stimulus package and expanded SCHIP, the state children's health insurance program.

We strongly urge that budget cuts or policy changes not be made that will limit access to HUSKY. We have been working long and hard in the community to ensure that low-income children and their families have access to health care. Without health coverage, parents and children will forgo needed medical care and medicine until there is a crisis. The state will end up paying for the cost of care, but at a much higher price.

Specifically, we urge:

Continuation of state-funded medical assistance to legal immigrants living in this country for less than five years: Since 2004, Connecticut has been providing health care to legal immigrants regardless of when they arrived in this country. The Governor is proposing to eliminate this coverage even though most of the cost of health care will be reimbursed by the federal government through the newly expanded SCHIP.

Full dental coverage for adults on Medicaid: The Governor is proposing to cover only emergency dental care for adults. Good dental care is integral to good health. Untreated dental conditions can lead to diabetes, heart disease and blood infections. Without coverage, many adults will forgo preventive dental care and end up needing more costly emergency care.

Full access to dental care for children on HUSKY without prior authorization: Requiring prior authorization as recommended by the Governor will create an unnecessary barrier and delay care, preventing children from getting the dental services they need in a timely manner.

No premiums or co-pays for low-income parents on HUSKY or increases in premiums for children on HUSKY B: When the state imposed co-pays on office visits and prescriptions

Testimony of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition Before the Appropriations Committee

several years ago, thousands went without care because they could not afford the additional out-of-pocket costs.

Medical interpretation services to ensure that families who do not speak English as their first language understand doctor's orders and can comply with needed treatment. In Bridgeport, over 70 different languages are spoken in our schools. Not only are translation services critically needed, federal funds to pay for medical interpretation services were included in the SCHIP reauthorization.

Self-declaration of income: Self-declaration of income reduces administrative paperwork. The state can verify income through electronic databases.

Support for community-based outreach, especially during the transition to new HUSKY health plans, and continued support for Healthy Start. Access to prenatal care is one of the most critical determinants of a healthy birth outcome.

Regular independent performance assessments conducted by Connecticut Voices to ensure that changes in HUSKY policies and health plans are closely monitored.

Child Care

The Governor has proposed a \$10 million increase to Care4Kids, the child care subsidy program, and a \$750,000 increase to support state funded child care programs. Because of inflation, these increases will only be enough to cover the children currently in the program. There will not be enough funding to increase the number of children served in either Care4Kids or state funded child care. Not being able to pay for child care is one of the most significant barriers preventing parents from getting and keeping a job.

Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) and Other Support

TFA (Temporary Family Assistance) provides cash assistance that is only a fraction of the federal poverty level. Two years ago, the General Assembly's budget provided TFA cost of living increases to rectify this situation. Now is not the time to reverse course and eliminate them. Doing so would reduce TFA cash assistance to 37% of the federal poverty level from 51%. We strongly urge the Appropriations Committee to continue these critical cost of living increases in the state budget.

We hope you will reverse the Governor's cut of 25% to transportation support for TFA recipients for work and work-related activities. And we urge you to support the Governor's funding for the state supplemental Food Stamp program for legal immigrants and the expanded assistance to food pantries and food banks.

We also urge you to restore \$150,000 to the Diaper Bank that was eliminated in the Governor's budget. Currently, there are no federal or state supported resources for free or reduced costs for diapers. Food stamps and WIC *do not* cover diapers or any other hygiene products.

Testimony of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition Before the Appropriations Committee

In low-income households babies often spend the *whole day or longer* in a single diaper, because the family cannot afford diapers. Inadequate diaper changing increases the risk of numerous health problems from skin diseases to hepatitis. Cloth is **not** an option for most poor people. Most childcare centers require parents to provide disposable diapers and there is not always easy, affordable access to washing facilities.

Connecticut has been at the forefront of addressing this problem. With \$150,000 in state funds for each of the past two years, the Diaper Bank distributed over 2 million diapers to over 3,000 children in need in Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford.

Job Training

BCAC supports job training investments in the Governor's proposed budget to help the unemployed and laid-off workers that level fund adult education and provide an additional \$450,000 for worker training. We oppose using a Reagan-era strategy to cut funding for important human services by creating block grants. The Community and Social Services Block Grant and the Employment Services Block Grant are strategies for cutting vital services for Connecticut's disadvantaged and low-income families. We urge you to restore this funding.

Commission on Children and Office of the Child Advocate

Lastly, we urge restoration of funding for the Commission on Children and Office of Child Advocate. Over the years, we have worked closely with the Commission and find its work invaluable to our state. It not only provides critical information, data, ideas and even staffing for both the legislative and executive branches but provides invaluable assistance to organizations across the state.

The Office of Child Advocate investigates deaths of children under state protection. Its findings and recommendations help Connecticut minimize such deaths and improve its child protective systems. Moving this function to the state Attorney General's Office dilutes the focus and forces this important work to compete with other AG priorities.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our testimony.

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The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) is a non-profit coalition of 80 member organizations funded in 1985. Our members represent a broad range of agencies including community centers, counseling organizations, early childhood programs, health centers, hospitals, churches and synagogues, and parent and civic organizations.

