

Testimony of April Dipollina
Monday March 16, 2009
Before the
Government Administration and Elections Committee
Commenting on:

H. B. No. 6375 AN ACT CONCERNING REVIEW AND TERMINATION OF CERTAIN BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS.

S. B. No. 839 AN ACT CONCERNING MERGERS AND CONSOLIDATIONS OF VARIOUS STATE AGENCIES.

S. B. No. 840 AN ACT CONCERNING THE ELIMINATION OF THE OFFICE OF CONSUMER COUNSEL, THE OFFICE OF THE HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE, THE OFFICE OF OMBUDSMAN FOR PROPERTY RIGHTS AND CERTAIN LEGISLATIVE COMMISSIONS

Good morning, Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone and esteemed members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony today on some very important proposed bills. My name is April Dipollina. I live in Waterford CT and I represent the Connecticut Family Support Network in Southeast CT. I am also the parent of a child with a special health care need.

H.B. No. 6375 would eliminate the Connecticut Family Support Council as an unnecessary and obsolete entity. I am here to tell you that the Family Support Council is anything but unnecessary or obsolete. In fact, over the past ten years without the benefit of a budget allocation since its inception, the Council has become a major state resource to state lawmakers, and many state agencies that are otherwise at a loss to determine how best to support families. In direct response to the shortcomings in state systems and the needs identified by parents the Council has become a strong proactive force for developing resources for families. For example, Council members collaborated in pursuing federal grants to establish a coordinated network across the state. Today that network, the Family Support Network, employs six coordinators in six regions around our state. I am the regional coordinator in Southeast CT. The Family Support Council is my strongest partner and most valuable resource. The Council provides information, support and education to Connecticut families caring for a child with special health care needs. In my region I maintain an e-mail list serve with over 200 parents and professionals; I offer 3 support groups, many workshops and educational training programs for parents and professionals. The 5 other coordinators are doing similar work in their regions, serving hundreds of families each year. Without the network, there would be a great void in the care of children with special health care needs. The Family Support Network and the Family Support Council represent a vital collaboration that truly works to improve the lives of Connecticut citizens. Personally, I think the Council has done a lot of important work for the state at no cost! Why would we want to stop that? The Family Support Council is made up of family members of children with special health care needs and state agencies. It would also be a great disservice to the members who have worked so diligently to improve systems and give hope to so many families of our state. I urge you to preserve the Family Support Council as a necessary and, unfortunately, far from obsolete state entity.

Also in H.B. No. 6375 the Commission on Children is allowed to "sunset" and S.B. No. 840 would eliminate it completely. The Commission is a member of the Family Support Council and has been a very active and dedicated resource for the work we do. There is no other resource like the Commission on Children in the state. Their ability to conduct rapid and thorough research keeps all of Connecticut informed about the circumstances of children and families as well as cutting edge solutions to problems families face. The Commission on Children has provided significant resources on bullying, obesity, violence and health care when those issues were only starting to be recognized for the problems they represent in children's lives. Just last week the Commission sponsored an event on President Obama's stimulus package that identified enormous opportunities for funding to the state of Connecticut. I do appreciate that we are in very difficult economic times, but these are the times that children are most at risk, especially children with disabilities or complex medical conditions. Losing the Commission on Children would not represent a savings in the budget. It would represent a loss of a critical resource and a connection to a great many other resources we can not do without at this time. I urge you to preserve the Commission on Children.

Next I would like to turn your attention to S. B. No. 839 and S. B. No. 840, specifically in the proposal to eliminate the Offices of the Child Advocate and the Health Care Advocate. Both of those agencies have been dedicated partners with the Family Support Council. The numbers of families I refer to the Offices of the Health Care Advocate are increasing each month. Just this month I sat with a mother that was depressed and at a loss for what do next because her insurance would not cover the only wheel chair that was appropriate for her 3 year old daughter. That same day I got an e-mail from a Mom telling me that she was still fighting with her insurance co. to get a therapeutic vest covered for her daughter. I also have a mother who emailed that she is so sleep deprived that she is afraid to go out to do errands. She is not getting enough support through the state systems we have in place to support her daughter at home. These are the families that I refer to the Health Care Advocate and the Child Advocate. What will I tell these parents if we eliminate these offices? Who will fill the gap and stand up and fight for these and many other families? It is crucial that these agencies remain viable and most importantly independent to ensure their ability to maintain objectivity and freedom to examine complaints when children are not served as they should be. Furthermore, these two agencies do their work with a great deal of expertise, not only in the fields of child welfare, juvenile justice and health care and but also in the laws, ethics and standards that drive those fields and in the investigational techniques required to get fair and accurate accounting of the facts. Children with disabilities or complex medical conditions are at great risk for neglect from caregivers and public systems. Most people intend to be helpful but we find over and over again that they either just do not understand children with special health care needs or they are at a loss themselves for lack of resources to offer. Subsequently, families find themselves in dire circumstances and only the independent Advocates have the access and authority to bring people together to work out solutions. I urge you to preserve the Office of the Child Advocate and the Health Care Advocate.

Thank you for your time and attention. I certainly appreciate the grave challenge before you but I promise you that the Family Support Council, the Commission on Children, the Office of the Child Advocate and the Office of the Health Care Advocate are all agencies that cost the state little and represent significant resources and even savings for the state of Connecticut.