

Testimony SB 839

Ann Nelson, Parent of a Child with Special Needs

March 16, 2009

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, my incredible Senator Ed Meyer, and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee,

My name is Ann Nelson. I am grateful to have the opportunity to testify regarding SB 839, *An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidation of Certain State Agencies*. I am speaking with you today to plead with you **not to support** SB 839, specifically as it concerns the elimination of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) and the Child Fatality Review Panel Authority. Eliminating this state agency will significantly compromise the lives of thousands of Connecticut children, specifically children with mental illness or emotional/behavioral disorders. Let me share some statistics with you concerning this vulnerable population:

- According to The Children's Mental Health Advocacy Campaign, more than 150,000 Connecticut children have behavioral health issues (2007).
- The Connecticut Department of Public Health's Voice of Youth Survey (1997) reported that one in three youth in grades 7-9 expressed having a serious emotional or mental health problem in the preceding year (higher than the national average of one in five).
- Many of these children do not receive adequate mental health services (according to the Report of the Surgeon General in 1999, less than 20% of children with serious mental illness receive mental health services) leading to more serious outcomes including school drop out, incarceration and suicide.
- Nationally, suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth age 10-24, and the second leading cause of death among Connecticut youth ages 15-19 (CDC WISQARS).
- According to the 2005 Connecticut Health Survey, 12.1% of students attempted suicide one or more times during the past twelve months (higher than the national frequency of 8.4 %-CDC)

I am the parent of a child who inhabits this abysmal statistical profile. My daughter, Emily (15) has struggled with a mental health disorder for more than 10 years. She has received every possible diagnosis in the psychiatric diagnostic manual (DSM IV) including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bi-polar disorder, anxiety, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), psychosis and possible schizophrenia. She has been on over 22 different psychiatric medications, hospitalized three times (at the age of 8), educated in four different therapeutic schools (two of which were residential) and received numerous outpatient mental health services. I have advocated relentlessly for quality mental health care for my daughter, but have faced numerous obstacles in the process. I have come upon barriers to accessing care for Emily including but not limited to:

- Denial by my private insurance company (HMO) to cover contracted mental health services
- A paucity or absence of child psychiatrists on our private insurance provider list

(Refer to the data concerning the validation of this in *A Report of the Attorney General and Child Advocate's Investigation of Mental Health Care Available to Children in CT, 2007*)

- Time-limited mental health service provision through the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Voluntary Services
- Fear of abuse or neglect charges if I could not adequately meet my daughter's mental health needs in my home
- Lack of evidence-based community mental health resources to enable my daughter to remain in our home (She is currently in a costly residential setting)
- Repetitive bullying- a verbal assault that has been shown to correlate directly with adolescent suicide (Refer to the *Investigation into the Death of Joseph Daniel S. conducted by Connecticut's Child Fatality Review Panel*)

I was not only heartbroken for my daughter, but experienced further exhaustion and hopelessness with the additional complexities and challenges of our mental health system. I turned to several organizations/agencies for support including NAMI-CT, the Attorney General's Whistle Blower Unit and the Office of the Child Advocate. These agencies assisted me in advocating for my daughter- each with its own distinctive area of expertise based upon the credentials of their staff and the mission of the agency. Jeanne Milstein and her staff at the Office of Child Advocate (OCA) were uniquely qualified to support me with each challenge listed above, and also helped me to turn each of these trials into ammunition with which to advocate for improved mental health services for children and adolescents. I have had the tremendous privilege of working alongside Jeanne Milstein and the OCA in the organization of several press conferences utilized to educate our state and national leaders, as well as the public concerning childhood onset mental illness and youth suicide. Many of these events have been instrumental in helping to enact suicide prevention legislation (Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, 2004) and provide improved access to mental health services for children.

In summary, I plead with you not to support SB 839 and the Governor's proposal to eliminate the Office of the Child Advocate and the Child Fatality Review Panel. I would not want to begin to imagine where my daughter, Emily, would be had the OCA not offered her a chance for hope and recovery.

Passionately,

Ann Nelson
Parent of Daughter with Mental Illness
Madison
203-779-5098

Testimony SB 839
Allie Nelson
March 16, 2009

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee,

My name is Allie Nelson. Thank you giving me the chance to tell you how I feel about Senate Bill 839. I am speaking with you to ask you **not to support** SB 839 because it would take away the Office of the Child Advocate. The Child Advocate's Office has played a big role in helping to prevent bullying and writing some of the laws to make sure that bullies don't get away with it. I would like to share my experience with bullying.

I am now 13. When I was 11, a couple of boys in my class tried to get me to send them photos of me that were not OK. They bullied me and threatened me. I told the boys that I did not want them to continue to text me or talk to me, but they wouldn't stop. My mom called the police, and tried to have the boys take responsibility for their actions. Because of what the boys did to me, I have a hard time going to school. I also have a hard time going to school because girls also call me bad names sometimes. My mom called Jeanne Milstein at the Child Advocate's Office for help. My mom works very hard at getting me what I need. One time she was told that if she couldn't get me to school, I might have to have the police come and take me or that she was a neglectful mother. My mom called the Child Advocate's office again, and they helped tell her what her rights were and what to do to help me. I am getting home-bound tutoring now until I am less nervous about going back to school. My mom never did anything wrong except try to help me, and the Child Advocate helped her.

Please keep this job in place. I need my mom to get the best advice she needs to help me and my sister.

Thank you!

Allie Nelson
Age 13
Madison
203-779-5098