

March 13, 2009

Honorable Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

In light of the upcoming March 16 hearing related to the proposed Bill No. 839, An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidations of various state agencies, I am writing to urge you to oppose the closure of the Children's Trust Fund, which is one item in this Bill. It is critical for children, families, and Connecticut taxpayers that we work to prevent such closure. Across three decades, the Children's Trust has been a leader in programs and research for prevention of child abuse and neglect. Its initiatives not only teach families about child development and parenting, but also give them broader skills to solve the range of their own problems present and future. The effectiveness of programs of the Trust has been demonstrated by continual research and evaluation.

The \$1.5 million in savings that is estimated to result from closing the Children's Trust Fund is only short-term and small compared to the human and financial costs that will be incurred even by next year. Lacking the supportive guidance of the Trust, the number of families reported to DCF for child abuse or neglect is expected to increase by 300 to 400 in the coming year. The cost of having those children and their families investigated and monitored by DCF will quickly offset the approximately \$4000 per child that is initially saved. This is not even taking into account the future strains that will be imposed on the social service and criminal justice systems for the percentage of children who will eventually require such interventions.

It is commonly known that DCF is underfunded and overworked already. Yet under the current proposal, in addition to the new DCF-referred cases that will emerge after a closure of the Children's Trust, any of the Trust's surviving programs will also be given to DCF. DCF lacks the staffing and other resources to take on additional programs. Beyond this basic point, the two entities are grounded in contrasting philosophies: DCF reacts to already manifest crises and takes a monitoring role, which is of course very important, but the Children's Trust is the leader in terms of positive, research-based prevention efforts. Please remember that this difference was recognized by the Executive Branch in 1997 when the Children's Trust was made an independent entity.

As a researcher, I have been involved in evaluation of various initiatives of the Children's Trust. I have learned that because they are voluntary, and strengths-based, the Children's Trust programs are well received, accepted by about 97% of the at-risk families to whom they are offered. The bond of trust that forms between home visitors and families leads to more disclosure of emergent problems, which can be collaboratively solved before they turn into all-out crises that require the expensive DCF interventions. Importantly, Children's Trust programs do not carry the stigma that being involved with DCF does. Should the surviving Children's Trust programs (if any) suddenly become just another aspect of DCF, then they will be rejected by the very families who need them most.

For all the reasons above, I urge you to consider again the items in this Bill. Please support proactive work with CT families that is cost-effective both short- and long-term. In so doing you will help our state remain a leader in child and family well-being and you will make the most strategic allocation of taxpayer dollars. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
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