

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS
Public Hearing March 16, 2009**

Testimony of Carolyn Signorelli
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In opposition to Section 14, Governor's Bill 839
**AN ACT CONCERNING MERGERS AND CONSOLIDATIONS OF VARIOUS
STATE AGENCIES: Section 14 Amending C.G.S. § 17a-50**

I would like to thank the Chairs and distinguished committee members for this opportunity to be heard regarding Governor's Bill 839 and specifically regarding the Governor's proposal to eliminate the Children's Trust Fund contained in Section 14 of the Bill. I am opposed to this portion of the bill.

The State is at a Crossroad where it must Prioritize

Early and Voluntary Prevention.

As someone who spent 9 years representing DCF in child protection proceedings, as the head of the Commission responsible for providing legal representation to children experiencing the aftermath of neglect and abuse, and as a Council member of the Children's Trust Fund for the last four years, I understand that placing the programs of the Children's Trust Fund in DCF's hands would be a grave mistake. At a time when the policy makers of this state are struggling with how to improve the functioning and accountability of DCF and are seeking to balance the needs of vulnerable families for support and children for safety against the perils of government intrusion, the Children's Trust Fund is the agency poised to make a valuable contribution towards achieving that balance.

Early prevention is the most responsible and cost-effective method to reduce child neglect and abuse and all its attendant costs to our children, families, communities and state. Responsible because the state is proactive in helping parents be better parents and children avoid the pain of abuse and neglect; cost-effective because of the exponential expense childhood abuse and neglect costs our society.

I want to be clear that I am not arguing that DCF has no role in “prevention”. DCF’s child protection mission clearly encompasses a mission to prevent further child abuse and neglect; further deterioration of the family unit; and further mental health and behavioral effects of abuse, neglect and emergency removals. But that prevention mission is different than the CTF’s mission. As my 13 year old daughter succinctly analyzed the distinction after two sentences of explanation about what I was doing as I wrote this testimony: “You mean you won’t need DCF if the Trust Fund is allowed to do its job right.”

**An Independent Agency Focused Solely on Early Prevention is
Critical to Successful Prevention**

The Children’s Trust Fund is the state agency whose sole responsibility is to prevent child abuse and neglect. There was a very sound reason why the CTF was removed from DCF control and made an independent agency in 1997 – the inability of DCF to successfully address two conflicting missions: early prevention and child protection. The same reasoning that applied in 1997 applies today. Saving \$1.5 million in administrative and personnel costs will not compensate for the reduced success rate the programs of the CTF will experience if they are placed under the auspices of DCF.

The CTF’s methods are focused on enhancing the capacity of community providers and families to take responsibility for child welfare; its programs empower parents to improve their own lives through their timely, voluntary and supportive approach; and they have proved successful in reducing the incidents of child maltreatment by parents at high risk for such behavior. The Children’s Trust Fund from very early on embraced results based accountability to ensure that its programs work and that state dollars are spent on evidence based practices. As a result, the Nurturing Family Network and the Children’s Trust Fund are trusted resources in our communities.

One grandparent whose 17 year old daughter is currently participating with Nurturing Family Network unequivocally stated to me that if the program became a DCF program she would remove her daughter. What I have been told anecdotally about the unwillingness of at risk families to participate in a program associated with DCF has been confirmed by researchers in the field evaluating CTF programs. It was confirmed by the failure of DCF's Differential Response Pilot Project in Hartford. These programs will no longer be perceived as voluntary, empowering or helpful – all critical components to their success.

DCF's ultimate and necessary authority to remove children from their families and the perception in the community that they often do so unnecessarily and that, even when necessary, make it very difficult to be reunified, is incompatible with the prevention mission carried out by the Children's Trust Fund. Pregnant women and families identified as at risk, that have not been referred to DCF for neglect or abuse, should be engaged voluntarily. The voluntary nature of the participation in Children's Trust Fund programs is what allows the participants to be honest about the issues they need to address to be better parents. Parents are more likely to be open to constructive advice and direction about children's needs and parenting skills. With the help of CTF providers, families can prioritize and focus on the steps they can take to improve their situation, as opposed to being overwhelmed by DCF requirements. The personal initiative and the voluntary nature of the programs promote lasting gains in behavioral changes and the willingness to seek outside support so that future difficulties do not become a crisis. It is very difficult for DCF, who must always carry a stick due to its ultimate responsibility for child safety, to achieve this type of open and voluntary engagement.

DCF's Prevention Role Must be Focused within its
Core Mission of Child Protection and Safety

With all of DCF's current challenges and its primary mission to address the needs of children who have been abused, neglected, found delinquent or who are already facing mental health and behavioral issues, it is not cost-effective to require current DCF staff to administer these contracts and provide the training and quality assurance for programs that the Children's Trust Fund helped create, study, and perfect. The DCF staff that are assigned to administer the CTF programs will not be able to perform at the level or handle the workload of the CTF staff around the issues of contract management, program evaluation and improvement, enforcement of standards and training requirements, technical assistance and a myriad of other support and services the CTF provides statewide to its network of providers.

DCF is currently undertaking a tremendous and challenging initiative to divert referred families deemed low risk to a Differential Response Program. This is an appropriate and promising effort on the part of DCF to prevent these referred families from experiencing higher risk or an eventual crisis. The CTF has offered to assist DCF through a cross-agency collaboration that would promote voluntary engagement of these families. It would be more prudent to determine if DCF can successfully implement this prevention initiative before we place the pre-referral prevention programs of CTF under its control.

The Children's Trust Fund, an Agency that has Administered Successful Cost-Effective Programs and Embraced RBA, Should be Permitted to Continue its Work in the Early Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

The Children's Trust Fund should not be eliminated; it should be expanded to bring its vision, mission and methods to as many at risk families as possible. It is much more logical and cost-effective for the state agency that the legislature specifically created to prevent neglect or abuse from ever occurring and reaching the point of a DCF referral to continue administering, guiding and enhancing these programs so that

more and more families can be diverted from the child protection system. That would be cost-effective and responsible and consistent with our government's acknowledgment that its prevention efforts must be enhanced. It is not cost-effective to save \$1.5 million dollars in administrative costs, only to have \$17 million dollars in program costs become a wasteful expenditure when the programs lose their effectiveness.

The CTF readily embraced the legislature's initiative to analyze state agency performance through RBA methods and has utilized this approach to be self-critical and to improve its programs. On the other hand, questions about DCF's management and accountability continue to plague our state, yet DCF insists it can be all things to all families by agreeing it can take on the CTF programs and ignoring some of its documented failures at community and family engagement.

Early prevention is the priority and sole focus of the CTF. The CTF would make the examination of all current efforts at prevention, the identification of successful programs, and the implementation of best practices that support community providers and empower families its number one priority. In this way, the state can efficiently achieve a balance whereby government supports communities and families in raising healthier, happier children. This in turn will ultimately enable more families to benefit from the Nurturing Family Network, Healthy Families, Parent Empowerment and other successful programs and render more families less dependent upon state assistance and less subject to more intrusive and expensive government interventions by DCF, law enforcement, courts and corrections.

I therefore respectfully request that this Committee recommend to the General Assembly that the Children's Trust Fund be maintained as an independent state agency and be permitted to continue its work preventing child abuse and neglect in the State of Connecticut and that Section 14 of Governor's Bill 839 be deleted..

Respectfully Submitted,

Carolyn Signorelli