Testimony on Bill # 839
An act concerning mergers and consolidations of various state agencies

I am Linda Smith Cohen, LCSW. I live in West Hartford. 3/16/09

I believe Governor Rell has the right idea, but the wrong plan for Connecticut's vulnerable children. Saving money while crippling our largest child abuse prevention agency is a mistake. We must find a way to fortify preventive efforts in a way that saves money in the short-term and in the long-term as well.

Two plans have emerged that, if approved, will do just that. First, Karen Foley-Schain, Executive Director of The Connecticut Children's Trust Fund, has proposed a bold restructuring of her agency that will streamline all prevention efforts in the state. The CTF has a proven track record of preventing child abuse in CT. Their work is research based and their staff is experienced. Their Nurturing Families Network has recently been expanded to all birthing hospitals in the state. This is a time to build on that momentum, not undermine it.

The second proposal does build on that momentum nicely. The Select Committee on Children is proposing that The Nurturing Families Network, be expanded. Because Nurturing Families is effective at what they do, they have long waiting lists. Expanding their work will allow many more families to be served. DCF, by contrast, is an agency already overburdened with its complex and heartbreaking task of removing children from abusive homes. This is not a productive setting for primary prevention. Thus, strengthening an independent Children's Trust Fund, and its Nurturing Families Network, will likely lead to fewer cases of abuse in the state as well as to more families functioning independently. This is a wise redirection of our limited finances.

Preventing child abuse is a national concern as well. On 2/13/09 The National Academy of Sciences released a report stating, "Stronger effort [is] needed to prevent mental, emotional and behavioral problems in young people; research shows many prevention programs work." And they state that, "The federal government should make preventing [these] disorders, and promoting mental health in young people, a national priority."

It is important to remember that we have been at these economic crossroads many times in our past and our ill-advised decisions still haunt us. As far back as 1850, Hartford's Rev. Horace Bushnell urged us to protect our youngest citizens. He said, "Never is it too early for good to be communicated. Infancy and childhood are the ages most pliant to good." Since that time many efforts have begun, then faltered, often due to financial concerns. Any preventive work needs a full generation before the larger society can begin to reap the rewards.

Yet, while history has much to teach us, we must also embrace the technology of the 21st Century. If you still have any doubt about the need for prevention having a prominent

role in our system, please turn to the last page of my testimony. You will see brain scans of two infants. One is healthy and normal. The other child was in an orphanage in Romania from shortly after birth. The pictures speak for themselves. Treatment will always be more costly than primary prevention.

I believe a humane and wise society learns from its history and embraces the future at the same time. I hope this time our leaders will have the courage to strengthen, and continue to build on, the successful work of the Children's Trust Fund.

Thank you.