



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman
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Connecticut Commission on Children**

**Government Administration and Elections Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
March 16, 2009**

Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children and am here to speak on S.B. No. 840, a bill to eliminate The Commission on Children and its work on behalf of children and families.

The General Assembly created the Commission on Children through Section 46a-126 of the General Statutes with strong bipartisan support. We are mandated to bring together the three branches of state government with the private sector to design and advance public policies in the best interest of children.

In our work, we 1) develop landmark policies for children, 2) bring dollars and donated skills to the state, 3) lead in public information for children and youth, 4) perform key research on children's needs, 5) bring the family to government and government to the family, and 6) are recognized as the best coordinating entity for children in the nation. This costs the state \$1.30 per child.

Backdrop

The Commission on Children has a history of finding the problem, bringing in the experts and the customers, driving public policy, and focusing media attention on issues affecting children. We insist on civic engagement in all we do, with a focus on the family. Our agency has worked closely with you, guiding initiatives on school readiness, lead abatement, early reading, child poverty reduction, bullying, after-school programs, federal funds maximization, fatherhood, toy safety, parent leadership, child nutrition, and obesity reduction, to name a few.

The Commission speaks for children. We galvanize resources, constituents and unexpected stakeholders to make sure children thrive.

Children and the Recession

The recession is anticipated to cause three million children to fall into poverty. This will trigger \$1.7 trillion in long-term losses to the U.S. economy. In Connecticut, more than one-quarter of those using food pantries belong to working families. More than 100,000 children under 12 years of age are at risk of hunger.

We are hearing that the children in Waterbury are coming to school more tired and stressed. In Willimantic, they cannot keep up with the number of children who need to be transported to school who have moved into homeless shelters. In Madison, the number of students receiving subsidized school lunch has gone up dramatically.

The Commission has already drafted legislation with the Select Committee on Children, H.B. 6411, to ensure the strongest protections for children during this fiscal crisis. We are also working with leaders in Washington, D.C., to make sure our state takes every opportunity and identifies every dollar that might assist our children.

The last two recessions reveal that children stay poor for five to seven more years after a recession ends. Children who fall into poverty now will not recover when the economy recovers. What we do now will influence nearly a decade of children's lives. This is not the time to cut out or consolidate the agency that, for less than \$1.30 per child, promotes their health, safety, and learning.

The Commission performs the following functions:

Model policy design

- We scope out what is and is not working for children. We respond through policy to address gaps in areas such as anti-bullying, child poverty reduction, lead abatement, child obesity, after school, federal funds maximization for the family, the needs of infants and toddlers.

Accountants on cost effectiveness

- We designed our state's return on investment, *A Stock Portfolio for Children*, which is in your packets. This was conducted well before this recession to advise you on what is cost effective and successful for children.

Innovators

- We innovate new practice where the gap is too large and nothing has filled it. When it was clear that families were not part of government and government did not reach families, we designed the first family civics initiative for parents in the country, called the Parent Leadership Training Institute. This initiative gives parents the tools and confidence to be voices for children in their schools, communities and state. Over the past decade, PLTI graduates have generated \$1.1 million in volunteer time.

Scholars on best research and practices

We analyze the impact of events, policies and programs on children. For example we analyzed:

- The impact of both 9/11 and Katrina on the children in our state. This research went national as the most in-depth study of natural and unnatural disaster on children. It was used by Congress and in our state led to the only legislation in the nation on children and unnatural disaster.
- How long children were waiting in foster care for adoption. These findings propelled our state's comprehensive adoption bill.
- The impact of racial integration in the early years on children's notion of difference. This led to strong integrated early preschool programming.
- The impact of school readiness in the kindergarten classroom. This study became the base for our current analysis of preschool programs.

Agents of trend analysis and results based accountability

We have been analyzing trends and bringing them to you for 15 years in *The Social State of Connecticut*, which we created with Senator Larson. It was the first analysis of its kind to look at the social health of our state and to use this as a public tool for policy leaders to gauge what is working over a thirty year trend line.

The current social health index is in your packet. It shows you, among eleven indicators, very high racial and ethnic disparities, more young children committing suicide, very high dropout rates in our cities, a decline in low birth weight and an increase in hate crimes. The Index is followed by a special section on youth.

Fundraisers for the State

The Commission brings in three dollars conservatively for every dollar you give us. We take every opportunity to inform you of federal financing opportunities as well as raising dollars to bring to agencies. These dollars do not come to our agency. They go to other state agencies and towns.

Recent examples include:

- FSET 50/50 Match Funds valued at \$2-3 million
- TANF Contingency Fund valued at \$18 million

- HUD Lead Hazard Reduction grant at \$12.4 million
- Urban Issues and Children - \$130,000
- After School Coordination - \$500,000
- Parent Engagement – \$200,000
- Playbook for Prevention - \$500,000
- Social State of Connecticut - \$40,000 match
- Home visitation in Medicaid – valued at \$7 million

We are working now on the federal stimulus package with the National Conference of State Legislatures and are providing information on all the incentive opportunities and billing opportunities for which we are eligible to garner federal funds. Our grant writer will help departments and districts.

Leaders on prevention rather than crisis

We wrote the cutting-edge bill on prevention with the Speaker that shifts our budget from crisis to prevention for children and requires the Governor to give a report on prevention spending in her state address.

We have led on prevention, rather than crisis, as a way to work with all children and youth in this state. It offers dignity, cost savings and true outcomes. Other states are replicating this strategy.

We studied how to talk about prevention most effectively – and designed a major Game Plan on Prevention with Coach Calhoun. This was on television, radio, print – all from dollars we raised. The Playbook for Prevention is a best seller for the state, at no cost to you. It is in your packets.

Ironically, the Governor in her budget states that we provide the same function as DCF. This is far from the truth. That is like saying the pediatrician performs the same function as the emergency room doctor.

We serve as the bridge between the community, family and the state

The Commission averages 350 calls per week from local citizens and parents. We average 800 hits on our website per week. State and local policy leaders utilize our agency approximately 30 times per week.

We distribute over 180 products per day to the public on children’s development. This ranges from products for every new parent in hospitals, in both English and Spanish, to t-shirts with

immunization schedules, to booklets on the importance of reading to children. Our products are also used in other states due to their clarity, access and art designs.

Statewide, we partner with mayors on children's issues, reach youth and parents, work with grandparents, help the librarians, and work with the police.

Partners with you, as well as Congress

We staff you on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states. These include school readiness, the Parent Trust Act, Homeland Security and Children Act, and the FSET 50/50 match law bringing dollars into our state in a match of 50 cents to the dollar.

We have worked extensively with our Congressional delegation on early brain research, school readiness, early reading, homeland security and children, and the stimulus package. All to help our state's children.

Representative Heinrich pointed out in the Appropriations hearing that perhaps people don't know of the good work of the commissions. She's right. We staff and bring the product to you. It is yours. At no point do we focus on advertising our own agency. The sole outcome of the Commission on Children is children's success and your success in leading for them.

So at times like this we are an easy target. Though an odd target, as we are less than half of 1% of the total budget. Sometimes it is easier to wipe out a small agency in its entirety than to delve into larger agencies to look for efficiency or to explore revenue generation. Often however, those small agencies are the most efficient operations around.

Staffing

We made a commitment to build this agency up so that you had the most exceptional staff for your child planning and child policy needs. This includes a former staff member of the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families under Congressman George Miller and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, the former editor of *Weekly Reader*, the former head of the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, a former news reporter from a reputable daily newspaper, a former legislator and a former chief of staff in the executive branch. We have three bi-lingual staff members to reach growing populations in our state. I myself was chief of staff for all of family policy for the state of California under Speaker Willie Brown and staff to the human services committee on child care, poverty reduction and all of human services.

These combined staff skills lead to exceptional research, outstanding products, consumer design that truly reaches the public across educational level, high acumen in public policy, strategic sense and an understanding of each branch of government and the community.

We are proud of building this for you and hope that this leads to those of you who do not use the agency as much as you might, to use it more rather than to pare it down. We are at your service.

Consolidation?

Consolidating the commissions is like a poorly built Noah's Ark--two of this and two of that. When there has been a national or international crisis, people save the children. This task can not be reduced to just two professionals. We are glad to work with you on innovative solutions that address efficiency and budget decreases without a form of consolidation that risks failing all sectors.

From the framework of innovation and forward thinking, we are glad to be given new and additional functions that meet changing state needs for the family. Some discussion has emerged to give our agency more leadership in prevention policy including: 1) family impact analysis; 2) research, coordination and public information on best prevention practices; 3) a state family policy framework and 4) promotion of federal funds maximization opportunities to bring prevention practices to scale. We are glad to offer language for these functions.

Summary

Thank you. We hope to keep working for you and the 800,000 children and their families who depend on us. We will continue to give you a proven return on investment.

"Whatever the issue may be, the Commission seeks out the authoritative information, identifies the knowledgeable leaders in the field and defines the best practices. In doing so, the Commission informs the legislative process and the general public on those policies that have proven effective in advancing the health and well being of children. If we didn't have the Commission, we would have to invent it."

-- **Peter Libassi**, formerly of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare