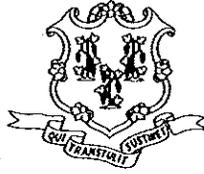


State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Human Services Committee
Public Hearing
February 10, 2009

Testimony Submitted by Elizabeth C. Brown

Senator Doyle, Representative Walker and members of the Committee. My name is Elizabeth C. Brown and I appreciate the opportunity to testify on many bills before you that seek to reform and provide families a stronger voice in DCF proceedings concerning custody and parental rights.

The Commission supports key concepts in the following bills: SB 636, An Act Concerning the Presumption of Innocence and Preservation of Constitutional Rights in Proceedings Alleging Child Abuse or Neglect by Parent or Guardian; HB 5421, An Act Concerning Proceedings and Operations of the Department of Children and Families; HB 5425 An Act Prohibiting Reliance on a Theory of Predictive Neglect or Predictive Abuse in the Adjudication of Child Neglect and Abuse Cases; HB 5980, An Act Concerning Verification of Information by the Department of Children and Families in Abuse and Neglect Cases; HB 5981, An Act Concerning Communication Between the Department of Children and Families and Parents or Guardians in Juvenile Matters; and HB An Act Concerning Oversight of the Department of Children and Families.

As an introduction and framework for my testimony, the Commission supports efforts to make the Department of Children and Families a more transparent, accountable and a more family friendly department. Over the years the Agency has morphed into an agency driven by court orders and outside observation. Decisions are based on the rule of law and not necessarily driven by a deep understanding of the changing family or experience in serving families of diverse backgrounds and economic status. Are families better off because of the existence of the Department?

636
5421
5425
5980
5981

The number of bills before this committee would indicate that the public has lost confidence in the Department's goals and mission. Reform, oversight, parental rights, presumptive innocence, more confidentiality in proceedings, more mandates related to giving family members the first priority in placing a child and establishing a rebuttable presumption for custody for a foster parent who is a relative- reflect a deep need for an assessment of the effectiveness of the existing procedures, protocols, training and leadership necessary to focus on the interests of the child in the context of the changing family, economic circumstances, and demographic reality of where children live.

Over the course of the public hearings held jointly by the Human Services and Select Committee on Children last fall, it became clear that there is a disconnect between the statutory mission of DCF and the actual operations that carry out their mandate. The perception becomes the reality. Families feel disenfranchised and not part of the solution. Families do not understand their rights and do not feel valued or respected.

The bills before you seek to hold DCF accountable, give families an equal footing and provide a process for mutual benefit. The Commission supports implementing these statutory changes, but believes the Department needs to embrace a new culture of doing business focused on prevention, family support, extended family inclusion, community capacity building and move from crisis to prevention. This is a dramatic culture change, and may require a statutory change to the mission and performance measures of the Department. The Commission welcomes and opportunity to work with all parties on this important issue to ensure children live in safe, loving, secure families.