

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly Concerning
Governor Rell's Proposed Budget Cuts for the Children's Trust Fund

December 9, 2009

My name is Caroline Mavridis, and I am a resident of Willington. I am here to ask that you vote "no" to the Governor's deficit mitigation plan, which will decimate the Children's Trust Fund.

As a UCONN researcher, I have been involved in evaluating Children's Trust Fund programs. Today I'd like to speak about the Nurturing Families Network (NFN), specifically its intensive home visiting component. Home visits are offered to parents who meet criteria for risk of child abuse or neglect. In the context of our group's research, I have 'shadowed' a number of NFN home visits. I would like to describe to you one experience to illustrate the program's positive impact on families.

The home visitor, who I will call 'Diana,' works with about 20 families in one of Connecticut's most impoverished cities. We went to the home of a 18-year-old mother who lived with her two-year-old girl and several other family members in a humble, but tidy, apartment in one of that city's poorest sections.

I was struck, first, by how happy the young woman was to see Diana. She greeted her with a hug, as did the grandmother. Diana had brought a bag of toys and books for the baby, who happily recognized her. She took the time to hold, sing, and play with this little girl, in the process modeling positive parenting skills that the mother was then able to imitate. Also impressive, to me, was that this quiet girl, who had been unwilling to engage with Diana earlier on, had taken the initiative that week to phone the agency about her concern over the child's temper tantrums, and to request advice and information. This is testimony to the powerful bond of trust that develops between parents and their home visitors, a trust that brings emerging problems to light before they turn into crises that permanently alter families' lives through child removal. In response to the mother's concern, Diana brought information, which she patiently helped her to read and understand. She also guided the mother in reading a book to her baby.

Beyond parenting skills, NFN home visiting strengthens families by helping parents to improve their own lives. With Diana's guidance, this young mother, once so unengaged, has become the leader of a support group for pregnant teenagers. Her goal now is to become a pediatrician. She is dreaming again. Meanwhile she is learning to be a sensitive parent and role model for her child. Home visitors like Diana bring knowledge, skills in reaching out and relating to these families, and an ability to push and empower them toward a healthy self-reliance.

If the Governor's deficit mitigation plan is passed, scenarios like this one will become just a memory for some of our state's most fragile families. Cutting funding for the Children's Trust Fund is not the way to stabilize our ailing economy, or the well-being of vulnerable families. Prevention programs like NFN are demonstrably effective, and an economical alternative to traumatic child removal and the expensive DCF monitoring they will require.

Beyond dollars, however, we need to bear in mind that this is an ethical issue. There could not be a worse time than now to take away the ability of CTF to assist vulnerable families. Increased poverty and stress heighten the risk of child abuse, domestic violence, and other problems that impact children's lives. Some continued spending is necessary as an investment to ensure the safe, healthy development of families and children, many of whom do not have access to a political 'voice' such as we do.

Please reject these cuts and vote 'no' to the Governor's deficit mitigation proposal as it now stands.

Respectfully submitted,

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