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TESTIMONY

Before the Appropriations Committee
Wednesday, February 18th, 2009

Good morning Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Susan Hamilton and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families. With me today are various members of the Department who are here to assist me in answering questions that members of the committee may have.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today on Governor Rell's proposed fiscal year 2010 - 2011 budget for the Department of Children and Families. We appear before you in appreciation of the support we have received over the last several years as the Department has made significant progress towards complying with the Juan F. Exit Plan and strengthening its overall ability to fulfill the multi-mandates of DCF.

As you are aware, the Department, and most especially our social workers and other direct line staff, have the responsibility and privilege of working to help the most vulnerable families and children in our state. These families typically grapple with the harmful effects of poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and a host of other problems that confront them and our state. As such, any of the children and families we serve require intensive treatment services and other forms of interventions that can be expensive. Investments and practice improvements in recent years have ratcheted up performance at DCF and are assuring better outcomes for children and families. These improvements include:

- 1) The Department continues to meet or nearly meet 20 of the 22 outcome measures required under the Juan F. Exit Plan and a recent jump in our performance in meeting the

Treatment Planning outcome with nearly 80% of plans being deemed compliant in the latest quarter, compared to 51% a year ago.

2) Lowering the DCF social worker caseloads from 15 to 20 cases compared to 40 to 60 cases several years ago.

3) 41% increase in families receiving services in cases where the children are living in the home since 2002.

4) Nearly 25% drop in the number of children in out of home care as the result of abuse or neglect since 2000.

5) Children placed in a family setting increased by 15 percentage points since 2002.

6) There are 340 fewer children (38.2%) in a residential program and there are 160 fewer children (32.6%) in an out of state residential program since 2004 with 74% currently receiving treatment in New England.

But given the breadth of our mandate areas, there remain areas in need of continued improvement. These improvements and reforms must reach more of those we serve, and must continue to be driven by measurable outcomes. However, there is a national economic and fiscal crisis which means that all government functions, including the work of the Department of Children and Families, must be examined aggressively to set spending priorities and accounting for each and every dollar spent. While the Governor's proposed DCF budget necessarily includes a number of difficult savings proposals, it preserves the advances made by the Department and sets clear spending priorities as the Department continues to improve outcomes for children and families.

I would like to take some time to highlight a number of the Governor's proposals:

First, this budget calls for the closure of the Department's High Meadows residential treatment facility. High Meadows dedicated staff provide excellent care to 36 children between the ages of 11 and 18. However, as the Department has moved to serve children in their communities rather than institutionally, we have been successful in greatly reducing the number of children who require residential treatment as noted earlier in my testimony. High Meadows represents the Department's oldest and smallest facility and in addition to the operating cost savings, which would be achieved through closure of the facility, the State will avoid the cost of renovations which would have exceeded \$11 million over the next few years.

Second, the Governor has proposed a \$2 million reduction in funding for DCF's own Supportive Housing for Families program. The Supportive Housing program provides assistance with housing issues as well as assessment and case management services intended to help families successfully achieve reunification. The Department believes that some efficiency can be actualized by working with its contractor for these services, however, implementation will necessitate a reallocation of housing and case management resources and a reduction in the total number of family served by this program.

Third, the Governor has proposed the elimination of funding for a number of services that, while not without value, have either not yet begun operation or are not critical to the Department's core mission. These include the elimination of contracts for Neighborhood Centers, Community Emergency Services, the Diaper Bank, and a Safe Haven media campaign. In addition, the Department will not move forward with a planned evaluation of the Behavioral Health Partnership, a Safe Harbor Respite program, the last one of four Supported Work Education and Treatment programs, as well as the implementation of wrap-around services whose development is not yet completed. Finally, the Department has reconfigured an existing group home in place of developing 2 new group homes targeted to serve children in the Juvenile Justice system. In aggregate, cancellation of these programs and projects will result in savings of \$5,574,299 per year.

Fourth, the Governor has proposed a \$3 million per year reduction in flexible funding. The Department has been successful in managing these funds which are intended to provide rapid access to individualized services that can be successful in avoiding the need for an out of home placement or allowing a child to be served in a less intensive level of care. Expenditures for these services grew rapidly between FY 2004 and FY 2007, rising from \$8.6 million to \$29.9 million over that three year period. In response, the Department developed a credentialing program to ensure uniformity in the cost as well as setting the Department's expectations for the most commonly purchased services. The Department also employed regional budgeting procedures to ensure that funds were available for these needed services. As a result of this improved management, flexible fund savings of \$3 million were realized during FY 2008. The Department anticipates that through continued management and definition of these funds, an additional \$3 million in savings can be achieved.

Fifth, the Governor proposes eliminating DCF-funded services for individuals who are more than 20 years old. The Department currently funds a limited number of services to assist young adults in transitioning to independence. The principal impact of this change will be to stop funding under the Community Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) on each participants 21st birthday. The CHAP program serves nearly 800 young adults annually who have completed High School and are committed to the Department, approximately 200 of these young adults are over the age of 20. The CHAP program provides rental assistance and case management in order to develop the skills necessary for independent living. Recognizing the life-long importance of education, the Governor maintains funding for college tuition, which may extend up to age 23.

Sixth, the Governor proposes to consolidate grants for the prevention of child abuse and neglect into DCF by transferring program dollars from the Children's Trust Fund including Nurturing Families Network, Help Me Grow, Family Empowerment Initiatives, Family School Connection and Kinship Funds. A reallocation of current DCF staff is anticipated to absorb program oversight and assure proper integration of all related prevention programming. We believe the DCF Prevention Division can properly

administer the programs although some of the program oversight may be handled in the DCF Area Offices which would move the management of programs closer to where the services happen.

Finally, I'd like to call your attention to the Governor's proposal to continue to provide funding for \$5 million annually in enhanced therapeutic foster care rates. These rates are planned in order to meet the State's need to provide adequate numbers of quality foster homes for the State's most vulnerable population. At the center of the State's plans to serve children in the most home-like setting possible is the need to have such homes available in sufficient quantity and to have those families supported with wrap-around services and training that allow them to safely serve children.

Thank you for your consideration and attention this morning. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.