

Testimony of Kathleen G. Novak  
Re: The Governor's Proposal to Eliminate the Children's Trust Fund and its Staff from  
the CT State Budget  
2/18/09

My name is Kathleen G. Novak and I am testifying today about the egregious proposal of Governor Rell to eliminate the Children's Trust Fund and its entire staff from the budget. I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and former supervisor and program manager of the Healthy Families CT – Hartford child abuse and neglect prevention program now called Nurturing Families Network. When I began as supervisor in 1995 at one of the first two sites in the state, it was just after the horrific physical abuse and death of “baby Emily Hernandez”, a nine month old born into a family with multiple social problems including domestic violence, physical abuse and medical neglect. After her death, the DCF was given mandates to give extensive training in these social problems to its workers and to enhance the strict supervision of workers and supervisors. Ironically, these are the very components of the CTF's programs of prevention, which now stand to be taken away because of the severe deficit in our state budget.

The CTF programs of prevention utilize these methods in all of their programs because they understand the key need to educate the public and clients and families in order to meet the goal of safeguarding the lives of our children. On April 16, 2009, for example, they will hold a Forum on Shaken Baby Syndrome at the Wadsworth Atheneum, to which the community is invited to learn about this serious health issue of babies. I participated in the CTF's fundraising campaign some years ago by hosting a dinner party for 75 of my closest friends to educate and share the need for education about this issue. Campaigns such as these are vital to the awareness of us all about the issues affecting our children, and no agency does it like the CTF. The Family Empowerment Programs such as “Real Men Make Better Dads” that addresses single parenting uses research findings that show that dual parent households are less likely to be in poverty than single parent homes. The CTF recognizes that poverty is a major contributing factor to child abuse and neglect, and thus integrates this knowledge when planning their programs. Another program that I know first-hand is the Family School Connection at Betances School in Hartford. The CTF uses social indicators when supporting programs such as this that provide home and school based support to families whose children are tardy, truant or have behavioral or academic issues. The Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford that is charged with program evaluation, in its 2007 Process and Outcome Evaluation Report showed that there was significant increase in parent-school involvement after six months and one year, and significant decrease in parental stress for the similar time periods. Other family systems that the CTF supports are grandparents or other relatives that must take on the role of guardian for a child. Their Kinship Fund and Respite Fund supports this population that find themselves stressed from the unplanned financial, emotional and social burdens of caring for young children. And the Help Me Grow program is an excellent example of the intensive collaboration of services that the CTF supports when it comes to identifying young children at risk of developmental *and* behavioral problems. This is critical in child abuse prevention as behavioral issues are often the cause *and* effect of unhealthy parenting practices. This CTF program provides medical practitioners, parents and others with

education and training and works with the Birth-3 System, 211 Info line and other public health programs to detect and refer our youngest children for the help they need.

Although I may be a bit biased, I believe the cornerstone of the CTF to be the Nurturing Families Network programs which are affiliated with all 29 birthing hospitals in our state. These programs offer supportive phone contact with new families, parenting groups, and intensive home visitation. The chief goal of the NFN programs is to keep families out of the DCF system by providing the best possible support to first time parents. In 2006, the Center for Social Research showed that there was considerable decline in reports made and substantiated on NFN families. Ever growing and changing to address new societal trends/risks, the CTF developed the "Families with Acute Problems" policy that tightens practices around social problems of domestic violence, substance abuse and poor mental health. How better to move forward in prevention than to obtain expert evaluation by the researchers at the University of Hartford and then use it to increase development of positive parenting and recognize the strengths of families? The CTF believes in a strengths-based model of service delivery, for families and workers alike. In fact, in 2003, it developed the Continuous Quality Improvement teams which directly involve staff in program policy and decision making. "The Hartford Expansion of 2005" provided eight more NFN home visitation sites to combat the extreme poverty-induced risk factors of Hartford's families. Over 1,000 community resource referrals were made by home visitors in 2005 and two-thirds of these were followed up by families. Now I ask you, in a city like Hartford known for its splintering of service delivery, if not for these home visitors, how would these families locate housing, jobs, and educational opportunities that clearly help lift them out of poverty, thus reducing the likelihood of abuse and neglect of their children?

The prevention programs of the CTF are indispensable in decreasing the cases of child abuse and neglect and fostering positive parenting. No other state agency in my view is as dedicated to these causes and to the elimination of the grave social problem of child abuse and neglect. No other agency is as equipped to collaborate, train and integrate the findings of research as the CTF when it comes to prevention of child abuse and neglect. This agency has the proven record of results, marked by the belief in continuous education, compassion and support. I applaud the efforts of Karen Foley-Schain and her staff in caring for our most vulnerable citizens and implore you, the members of the Appropriations Committee, to do everything you can to preserve this invaluable state agency.

Thank you.