

The Children's Law Center of Connecticut

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

Children's Law Center Requests Restoration of funds for Legal Services for Children

JUSTINE RAKICH-KELLY

Senator Prague, Representative Hamm, Representative Villano and members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of you today. My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Law Center of CT. For your convenience, with my written testimony, I have provided you with a packet of information including a fact sheet about the Children's Law Center, our most recent Annual Report and several testimonials. I am appearing before you today to request that you add back the \$150,000 funding that was removed by the Governor's proposed 2009-11 budget to enable us to continue to provide help to Connecticut's children.

In December of 1992, a young girl in northeast Connecticut was murdered by her father. This murder took place during a supervised visit. The people of Connecticut were so shocked by this horrible event that a group of legal and mental health professionals got together to figure out what had gone wrong. The biggest gap in the process that was meant to protect this young six year old child was that there was no attorney or guardian ad litem representing her interests. Thus, the beginning of the Children's Law Center, which opened its doors in April of 1993 in Willimantic, CT., with a mission to represent indigent children in family court.

Sixteen years later, we have grown and we have expanded our presence in the state. In the beginning of 2008, we represented children in the Courts of Hartford New Britain, Waterbury, Tolland and Windham. We were being lobbied by the presiding judges of New Haven and Middletown to expand into their jurisdictions. Last year, we were the fortunate recipients of \$150,000 of state funding, administered by the Children's Trust Fund, which enabled us to expand our representation program into the New Haven Judicial District

With the funding provided by the state, we hired our fifth staff attorney to provide services in the New Haven area and expanded our administrative support. In 2008 we handled 297 cases representing 466 children.

Our representation program is only one of the programs the Children's Law Center provides. We also run the Children's Law Line, which accepts calls for information, advice and referrals from people around the state who are having difficulty navigating the family court system. Anyone who does not have an attorney of their own and has a question about family law and protecting children can call and get information. Last year we spoke with 1,348 callers and helped 1,838 children. We receive a lot of positive feedback from our callers, who are referred by the courts, DCF, 2-1-1, Statewide Legal Services and many others.

Our newest program, Families in Transition offers mediation and parenting education services to no-income and low income families. Mediating conflicts between parents allows families to avoid litigation and avoid the harmful effects of parental conflict on their children. We worked with 88 families with 108 children last year.

I think it is important for you to know that our organization is the only one of its kind in Connecticut. We often operate at full capacity and have to decline court

appointments because we don't have the staff to cover the number of cases that demand our attention.

Several years ago, I had two clients named Kayla and Alexis. They were murdered by their father on the day that he was ordered to move out of the family home. I was subpoenaed to testify in the criminal trial against the father, who was subsequently found guilty. You can probably imagine the feelings of the people of this organization when that tragedy occurred. We were devastated and began to question the validity of our work. But, from that tragedy, again, came a ground swell of support – many colleagues – lawyers, judges, mental health professionals – all surmising that we can't know how many tragedies were avoided because of our presence in a single case.

Not all of our cases are marked by violence. But they are marked by indigence and chronic parental conflict, substance abuse, or mental illness. We provide an unparalleled service to the courts and to the families of Connecticut during the most stressful times in their lives.

All of our programs and services save the state money. We help the family court system work more efficiently. By working with our clients and their families to reach an agreement or settlement we avoid going to trial over 90% of the time. 98% of the time orders reflect our recommendations and 87% of cases do not return to court for post judgment litigation.

Cutting this state funding will have a drastic effect on our budget. It will cause us to retract our services from areas where they are greatly needed. I urge you to restore our funding and enable us to continue to protect Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you.