

Good afternoon Senator Harp and Representative Geragosian:

My name is Doctor Brenda Kurz and I am a resident of West Hartford. I am also an Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, where I am in my tenth year of teaching, primarily in casework, but in other areas as well such as research. I received my MSW from the Smith College School for Social Work and worked for several years as a clinical social worker at Duke University with primarily low-income children and their families. Many of these children were in foster care secondary to abuse and neglect. I am also a researcher. My doctorate in Public Health from the University of North Carolina is in epidemiology, specifically psychosocial epidemiology, which means that I am trained to address psychological and social phenomena that affect groups of people with a frequent goal being to identify and increase protective factors and reduce or minimize risk factors for phenomena such as child abuse and neglect. My area of concern is the mental well-being of low-income mothers of young children, particularly as it relates to these mothers' ability to care for their children. My clinical experience and the literature are replete with examples of the devastating impact that impaired maternal well-being can have on children, which can range on a continuum from relatively mild deprivation to extreme emotional or physical abuse that warrants removal from the parent's care, an outcome that we, of course, want to prevent, and the reason I am here today.

I'm pleased to have this opportunity to testify in support of the Children's Trust Fund (CTF) and its continued status as an independent agency, separate and distinct from the Department of Children and Families (DCF), rather than merged with DCF as proposed by Governor Rell. While I can understand the presumed cost cutting logic of the proposed merger in the short run, I submit that this merger would, in fact, be more rather than less costly, both financially and psychologically, in the long run. I submit that the Children's Trust Fund, as currently configured, is best able to achieve the goal of prevention of child abuse and neglect. My reasons pertain to mission, history, evidence, and stigma and are as follows:

1. Mission - CTF's mission is to prevent child abuse and neglect, along with establishing resources in communities statewide that support and strengthen families and ensured the positive growth and development of children whereas the mission of the Department of Children and Families is to protect children, not explicitly to prevent abuse.
2. History – (from CTF's Annual Report) - When created in 1983 by the Connecticut General Assembly, the Trust Fund was an advisory council to the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families. The Council and the Commissioner recognized that, in order to advance work in the field of prevention, the Council needed to include other state agencies and additional partners. Consequently, in 1997, the Children's Trust Fund became an independent state agency in the Executive Branch, responsible to the General Assembly. - Why would we change this now?
3. Evidence - The Children's Trust Fund has a proven record of effectiveness, as indicated by the University of Hartford's evaluations. Staff at all levels are committed, responsible, and open. In other words, the Children's Trust Fund as is, is working well. There is no reason to assume that the same results will occur if the programs are moved to DCF. In fact, there is reason to speculate otherwise as follows.

4. Stigma – Rightly or wrongly, DCF and those affiliated with it are stigmatized, an unfortunate reality inevitably associated with the fact that DCF has the power and ability to remove children from people's home, and we (meaning the general public) know this. In addition, help seeking is also frequently stigmatized. Parents and mothers in particular, are often reluctant to seek services, even supportive services under the best of circumstances. If the supportive services such as the programs currently offered by the Children's Trust Fund were offered by DCF as a result of the Governor's proposed legislation, then there will likely be a decline in the use of these preventive services, and a corresponding increase in abuse and neglect and costs. The fear of losing custody of one's children is often cited in the literature as a barrier to women entering treatment. On the other hand, motherhood may be strong motivator to accept help, but this won't occur without trust. Don't we want to maximize trust and minimize fear?

We have been at these economic crossroads before and some of the cuts that were made still haunt us. Too often primary prevention receives the short end of the economic stick. It can take at least a generation for society to reap the rewards of an effective prevention program. Here in Hartford as far back as 1850, Horace Bushnell promoted the idea of protecting our youngest citizens. He said, "Never is it too early for good to be communicated. Infancy and childhood are the ages most pliant to good." We currently have a strong agency, the Children's Trust Fund, with a well-trained and effective staff doing primary preventive work that is demonstrating positive results. This is not the time to squeeze these resources for short-term gain.

Thank-you.

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