

Members of the Select Committee, I would like to thank you for this forum.

I am a research fellow at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. I am here to urge that you support Bill No. 5144 for expansion of the Nurturing Families Network programs to all single parents with income below the poverty line. Poverty has been linked to a number of negative family and child developmental outcomes. As they currently stand, NFN services are well-received. They are accepted by about 97% of the families to whom they are offered. The programs not only address immediate survival needs but they also teach families about child development and parenting, help them set their own goals, and identify resources and supports to achieve those goals. In addition to further decreasing abuse and neglect before they do their damage, an expansion of NFN programs to all needy CT families is also strategic financially. It will further reduce the need for investigations and monitoring by the Department of Children and Families, which is important because that department already has a heavy workload.

However, I also want to draw your attention back to part of the Governor's budget proposal, which is to eliminate the Children's Trust Fund that administers NFN. The plan would involve moving some Trust Fund programs (such as the Family Development Credential) over to DCF. While I acknowledge the dedication and skill of the DCF team, that proposal is problematic on several counts. In addition to the fact that DCF is already dealing with a heavy work load, DCF and the Trust are two distinct entities. In fact the differences between the approach and the functions of these two entities were officially recognized in 1997 when the Trust was made into an independent entity. We know that DCF tends to deal with already manifest cases of abuse and neglect, and performs often a policing function as it can remove children from their homes. Families are wary. In contrast, NFN programs are voluntary, proactive and strengths-based. NFN family service workers strive to build open, trusting relationships with families. This is not simply a nice thought but is concretely important: This trusting relationship leads to greater engagement with the programs and more openness and disclosure by families. As a result, issues come to light and can be solved collaboratively before they turn into all-out crises. Again, this cuts the work load of the DCF both immediately and in coming years, as parents grow more and more independent of government aid and interventions. They gain resources and skills they can apply to future problems they encounter. Having been involved in research assessing family service workers' experiences of the NFN training program, I have observed firsthand that NFN has a transforming effect on approaches to family work. Home visitors state that it represents a radical, positive break from the deficit-based models they knew before. They are energized about their jobs. What an excellent thing in a line of work that too often sees high staff turnover, and burnout.

In addition to the differing approaches and functions of the Children's Trust and DCF, families also recognize the difference. They are perceptive and they understand the stigma associated with entering the system of child protective services. Pushing a Children's Trust program, in this case NFN, back under the umbrella of DCF will cause NFN to have the same negative association. Parents will be much less likely to accept the program. In that case the purpose of expanding NFN is defeated. The best answer is to a) reach more families at risk, by expanding the successful NFN and b) keep NFN running effectively as it already is, under the auspices of the Children's Trust. Respectfully, it does not make sense to undo a widely recognized, efficient, well-trained organization such as this. This is a smart investment in human capital, not to mention CT tax dollars in these hard times. Thank you for your consideration.

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