



February 26, 2009

Testimony Submitted by Christine S. Bianchi, MSW, LCSW

Re: Committee Bill No. 5144 - AN ACT CONCERNING AN APPROPRIATION TO EXPAND THE NURTURING FAMILIES NETWORK.

I am currently a Program Manager for a Nurturing Families Network meeting offered in the Waterbury community. We have been providing services for families giving birth at Waterbury Hospital since 1999. There are 3 levels of services provided from our organization: Nurturing Connections, Nurturing Group and Home Visitation. We have been successful in building a system of care for first-time families and engaging them to commit for up to five years. Yet with all of our success, there is evidence to show we can do more.

At this time, we have only 2 home visitors who have the opportunity to have an average of 15 families on their caseload. 1 of those home visitors has had a full caseload since July 2005. In 2008, we had one family graduate after 5 years of participation and there are 3 families graduating in 2009. Most of our openings have come from the attrition rate that naturally occur following staff turnover.

Each day we are screening families for need and eligibility on the Family Birthing Center at Waterbury Hospital. StayWell also provides prenatal services to a majority of the Medicaid covered and uninsured women in the city for a total of 350 each year. Approximately 1/3 or 115 of these families are first-time parents. Of these women, certainly more than 30 could benefit from the quality services we provide to prevent child abuse and neglect by strengthening families.

In the central area of our community where our main health center is located, more than 75% of the children under the age of six live below the poverty level, (Percent by Census presented by the Early Childhood Committee, City of Waterbury). Ten other neighborhoods have poverty rates for the same target population between 50-75%. This is a great opportunity to address these staggering rates.

StayWell's program has discussed specific plans and approaches for addressing these needs if expansion were to occur. The following would be included in our approach:

- Expand cultural responsiveness with the recruitment of an African-American staff member to address the high rates of substantiated child abuse & neglect in our community as compared to lower rates of program enrollment.

- Hire an Albanian speaking staff member who can provide home visitation services in the Albanian language for the increasing Albanian population in our community.
- Recruitment of families within the neighborhoods with greatest poverty rates for children
- Review of overlay of neighborhoods where teen pregnancy rates are highest within the city of Waterbury
- Linkage to Neighborhood Centers

This is an example of the needs in one community, the planning that has already occurred and the approaches that would be taken to meet the expectations of the program and the goal of the legislature.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of the proposed expansion. Waterbury families are seeping deeper in poverty and we are concerned about their risk for abuse and neglect as they transition to parenthood. We ask that you support the Children's Trust Fund and the proposed expansion of the Nurturing Families Network.