

Testimony of Laurie Read, MSW

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New London Site

In Support of

Committee Bill No. 5144, An Act Concerning an Appropriation to Expand The Nurturing Families Network

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban, and the members of the Select Committee on Children. My name is Laurie Read. I am the Clinical Supervisor of the Nurturing Families Program at the New London site at Lawrence and Memorial Hospital.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Bill No. 5144. The purpose of this bill is to expand the Nurturing Families Network to encompass programs aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect by single parents who have an income at or below the poverty level.

Statistics show that approximately 30,000 cases of child maltreatment are reported in Connecticut each year. Some of the identified risk factors for child abuse and neglect are:

- Single parenting
- High poverty rate
- Lack of parenting skills
- Lack of preparation for the stress of a new infant
- Lack of support from family and community
- Lack of adequate resources

Nurturing Families Network actively strives through its Nurturing Connections and Home Visiting Programs to address these specific issues by providing our clients with parenting support and education, connection to community resources, help with budgeting, and by helping our clients to pursue further education and/or secure employment.

In 1995, when Nurturing Families Network was started, there were two sites in Connecticut. As of the end of 2007, there were 42 sites. Between 1995 and 2007*, 4,934 families identified as high risk have received Home Visiting services through Nurturing Families Network. In 2007 572 first-time mothers engaged in the Home Visiting program and 1,112 first-time mothers engaged in the Nurturing Connections program. According to research done by the Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford, families engaged in Nurturing Families Network programs have shown consistent decreases in the areas of distress, poor parenting, and abuse. These same studies show that parents who are involved in Nurturing Families Network for at least 1-2 years are less dependent on TANF, are more likely to immunize their children than parents out of the programs, are more likely to become employed,

are more likely to further their education, report that they are less isolated than before entering the programs, and showed increased community life skills (i.e. budgeting, hobbies, organization).

**Statistics for 2008 are not yet published.*

Nurturing Families is an extraordinary program, providing essential services to families across Connecticut. It is a unique program in that it intervenes early and aims to *prevent* abuse and neglect, where many agencies and programs become involved after the abuse or neglect has occurred. The only obstacles the program faces daily are the limitations of funding and the restriction that services are currently only available to first-time parents. While the numbers showing the positive impact of Nurturing Families Network programs are already impressive, imagine the effect the programs would have by extending services to all families living at or below the poverty rate, as proposed in this bill.

Prevention of abuse and neglect is essential on two fronts. Research shows that not only does abuse and neglect cause serious injury, decreased brain development, and psychological problems, but that there is a strong correlation between child abuse and neglect and increased incidence of delinquency, criminal behavior, long-term mental health issues, drug dependency, and higher drop-out rates. Obviously the importance of intervening early to prevent these outcomes is extraordinary on its own. However, recognizing that we are a country in a recession, understandably interested in the financial benefits of implementing new or expanded social welfare programs, I will point out the financial implications of choosing the cost of prevention of child abuse and neglect over the cost of the consequences of abuse and neglect.

Prevent Child Abuse America estimates that by focusing on prevention programs and initiatives, taxpayers can potentially save approximately \$104 billion a year. Currently the estimated annual cost of mental health care services for children who have suffered abuse and neglect is over \$1 billion. Currently \$6.6 billion is spent annually on the hospitalization of these children. And currently approximately \$33 billion is spent annually on foster care services provided to these children as a result of neglect or abuse.

Now, I was not a great math student in school, and admittedly, I continue to struggle when it comes to budgeting both at home and at work. But, even I can see the financial sense in putting money towards front-loading services to avoid the immense cost of not being pro-active in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

We are in a time where we can not afford **not** to provide increased services to these families at risk and we are now under an administration that understands and supports this initiative. Please recognize the opportunity before you and support Bill No. 5144.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify on this matter.