

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Connecticut Legislature Joint Committee on Children Testimony in Support of HB 5199 February 5, 2009

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Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban, and members of the committee. My name is Tyler Calder and I am here today on behalf of the 120 members of the Senators Community Foundation, which is a program of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. Joining me are my fellow members: Sarah Stonehill, Brittany Yelenik, and Stefania DiFortunato.

We very much appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about House Bill 5199: national criminal and child protective services background checks for employees and volunteers of camps that are licensed by the Connecticut Department of Public Health. Please know that we would not be here today if it were not for the support of Senator Bob Duff, Senator Andrew McDonald, Representative Larry Cafero and their staff.

Child abuse is one of four issues that the members of the Center for Youth Leadership address. Our work on background checks started in 2003. Since then we have successfully lobbied the U.S. Postal Service, the Norwalk Board of Education and others to strengthen their policies and procedures concerning background checks.

As I read my remarks, I kindly ask that you picture your son or daughter, a relative, or that seven-year-old who lives on your street. There are four players who make his camp experience in Connecticut safe, happy and memorable.

First are his parents. When enrolling him in a camp they probably ask about the typical things: the types of activities, the ratio of staff to children, the snacks that are served, and the cost.

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But what many parents do not ask is whether the employees and volunteers of the camp have passed a background check conducted by the camp. In fact, of the 109 parents of school aged children that we surveyed last year, 106 said they never even thought of asking about background checks. And of the 106 parents, none had a camp representative volunteer information about background checks.

The next players are the camp employees and volunteers to whom the child's care is entrusted. They come from all walks of life, which is great because they share varied experiences with the children. The question is whether we really know them, their motives for wanting to work or volunteer at a camp, and their history, especially when it comes to their interactions with children.

That brings us to the next player - the camp. We place a good deal of faith in the organizations that provide services to children. We trust that they have hired the best people, checked them out, and trained them, and then supervise and evaluate them. Unfortunately, we know that's not the case in many instances.

Camps test their equipment, review first aid procedures, and conducts fire drills, but not every camp conducts national criminal and child protective services background checks of employees and volunteers. Sure, they usually conduct some sort of review, but it more than likely skims the surface of someone's background.

For example, of the 34 camps we surveyed, eleven conduct fairly extensive background checks on fewer than half of their employees and volunteers, and ten do not conduct any checks on any one. Many cited the cost of the checks and the time it takes to get the results; reasons, yes, but not legitimate ones when it comes to the physical and emotional safety of children.

The final player is you. We're doing our part. Our on-going student-led outreach campaign tells parents to ask camp directors one question before they enroll their child: "Have all the employees and volunteers in the camp passed national criminal and child protective services background checks conducted by the camp?"

Now we need you to do your part. We ask that you direct the Department of Public Health to require such checks of employees and volunteers as part of the licensing process. No checks? No license. The camp hires an employee or volunteer before the results of a check are returned? No license.

We know that camps and others are going to cite the cost of the checks when lobbying against this requirement. Nice try. The checks, which cost between \$18 and \$30,

can be shared equally by the camp and the prospective employee or volunteer. We'll even refer camps to agencies that conduct an unlimited number of background checks for a flat monthly fee.

We know this all sounds so cynical. But it's a sign of the times. The vast majority of adults who work with children do so because they care about their well-being; they would never do they harm. They do not hesitate when asked to complete a background check, and they are willing to wait to be hired until their prospective employer has received clearance of their background.

Camps, too, want to do right by children. By some need more oversight than others. We suggest you make the oversight uniform in at least one respect - background checks for all employees and volunteers.

Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you. I would be more than happy to answer any questions.

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