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Commission On Child Protection
State of Connecticut

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Written Testimony of Carolyn Signorelli
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the bills on today's agenda regarding the Department of Children and Families, as well as prevention services to children and families. I would like to provide testimony generally in support of bills 878, 879, 5915, 6411, 6419 and 6420 with some suggestions and caveats for your consideration. I am opposed to Sections 1 and 2 of Senate Bill 877.

**Raised Bill No. 877, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Program Review
and Investigations Committee Concerning the Department of Children and Families.**

Bill No. 877 containing recommendations from the Program Review and Investigations Committee appears to maintain a policy direction whereby DCF will continue to be responsible for virtually all children and families that are in need of treatment services for a myriad of issues effecting child well-being, for prevention activities that are mostly unspecified, in addition to its child protection mission. This bill also charges the Department with the task of developing "a strategic plan meeting the needs of children and families served by the department." It is premature to support these aspects of the Program Review Committee's recommendations found in Sections 1 and 2 of the bill, given the questions about the role, structure and leadership of DCF being posed in S.B. 878, S.B. 879, H.B. 6419 and H.B. 6420. While I recognize that the Department must continue to plan and strategize for how it will address its existing mission and goals, it would be wasteful for the Department to begin formulating a new strategic plan based upon the broad based responsibility for child welfare envisioned by the Program Review and Investigations Committee.

If the Department's role in prevention efforts is to be re-defined or voluntary services are to be privatized pursuant to the enactment of Senate Bill 878, then any future strategic plan or implementation of required programs must be informed by those policy directives. Also, in the event recommendations to re-structure or transfer responsibilities of the Department are made by the Task Force created by Senate Bill 879 or if the leadership audit called for in House Bill 6420 results in significant changes in leadership or its structure, it would be more efficient for new strategies to be formulated and implemented after those changes are effectuated.

I have no objection to the remaining Sections of the bill, but would respectfully suggest that Sections 1 and 2 be deleted at this juncture. Those sections maintain DCF as an agency with an extraordinarily broad array of responsibilities at a time when limiting DCF's role in prevention and in direct and voluntary services is appropriately being considered.

Raised Bill No. 878: An Act Concerning the Prevention Role of the Department of Children and Families.

My position on the appropriate prevention role for DCF informs my position on Senate Bill 878, as well as on Senate Bill 879 and House Bill 6411.

While I support the objectives outlined in this bill, I do not believe a task force is necessary to accomplish its key objectives, with the exception of examining the issue of privatization. The State of Connecticut should implement a state-wide differential response system and I commend the Department of Children and Families for its current efforts to do so. I serve on the Steering Committee to implement a Differential Response System (DRS) and while I think that July 1, 2009 is too soon, it would be appropriate to set a deadline with input from state agencies and community providers regarding the capacity of our state's existing array of community programs to serve eligible families and regarding when we could realistically begin to make referrals and build increased capacity as cases transition from the investigation track to the differential response track.

The questions posed in this bill to a task force regarding whether DCF should privatize voluntary services and what it would recommend for changes in the department's prevention role motivate me to respectfully provide the following observations and suggestions:

When services are sought out or accepted voluntarily, there is a significantly reduced need for direct government involvement. In fact direct involvement of DCF, which is seen by many in the community as a coercive agency, can interfere with the primary goals of DRS and voluntary services, which are to prevent child abuse and neglect and avoid the need for child protective services, as well as court involvement. While I think it remains to be determined the precise nature of "privatizing" that would ultimately be implemented, voluntary services from the point of entry where a hotline referral is deemed appropriate for differential response, as well as from the point of entry where a family voluntarily seeks help, should be handled by private community providers. This will enable DCF to focus on its primary missions. DCF's mandate to protect, treat, and prevent further harm from caretakers and the system for those children who come to its attention due to allegations of high risk neglect or abuse is an incredible responsibility that focuses on investigation and enforcement. In addition, DCF has a tremendous challenge to provide extraordinary care to the children in its custody. Achieving positive outcomes physically, educationally, behaviorally and emotionally for children who have experienced significant neglect or abuse followed by separation from their families or who have been committed as delinquents, requires diligent planning, coordination and faithful execution of the measures identified to meet the needs of those children. These tasks seem sufficient for one agency to focus its direct service mission and in some respects are at odds with a primary prevention mission. I would therefore not recommend that DCF's prevention role be expanded to primary prevention or pre-substantiation prevention.

Privatizing voluntary services in the context of a Differential Response System would mean that all low risk Hotline referrals identified as appropriate for DRS would be immediately directed to a community provider that would be responsible to engage the family in a voluntary intervention based upon a family conferencing model. DCF's role in the provision of direct services in DRS should be limited to making the referral to the community provider. I would

also submit for your consideration that the Children's Trust Fund is the state agency most suitable to collaborate with DCF, as well as DHMAS, DDS, DSS, and community providers on formulating a coordinated Differential Response System, that identifies community providers that are capable of implementing the model; coordinates existing community programs into the system; and ensures adherence to best practices through contract administration, training and evaluation. The reason I suggest the Children's Trust Fund for this responsibility is because it is the one agency in this state whose sole mission is to prevent child abuse and neglect. CTF has already developed a successful network of community providers through the Nurturing Family Network which engages thousands of Connecticut's at risk families on a voluntary basis to improve parenting and prevent neglect and abuse.

It is critical that a significant transition of state funds to a Differential Response System, designed to voluntarily engage families in the creation of their own solutions and support network, not be viewed by the community and families as a DCF program. I assert this with the utmost respect for those in DCF who are working hard to make Differential Response a reality in Connecticut. Unfortunately, whether the perception is fair or not, many families who would benefit from such an intervention will not engage if they see this as a DCF program and they believe that DCF is watching. This will defeat the purposes of a differential response model of intervention: fostering a family's sense of initiative, problem-solving capacity, personal investment and sense of security in their community; preventing the family's situation from deteriorating; and avoiding a future investigation that substantiates abuse or neglect.

For these reasons I believe that Senate Bill 878 should be amended to:

- Remove the need for a task force regarding DRS and DCF's prevention role;
- Clarify that the Department's prevention role is directed at families and children who are the subject of an investigation where abuse or neglect is substantiated or who are referred by the court to the Department for services to address delinquency or FWSN petitions;
- Require that a differential response system be implemented statewide as soon as practical, but the Department's role should be limited to collaborating with the CTF and other state agencies around establishing the program's procedures, selecting appropriate community providers to execute a family strengthening model of intervention, and identifying and referring eligible families during Hotline screenings; and
- Provide that voluntary services, including the differential response system, should be privatized to the extent that all direct services are provided by community programs and organizations.

The only purpose I see remaining for the task force proposed in this bill is to study the extent to which voluntary services should be transitioned to private community providers and whether this should include for-profit entities. This policy is being proposed for all social services in S.B. 346, To Transfer the Administration of all Social Services to Community Providers. The feasibility and benefits of allowing non-governmental entities to administer, as well as deliver, social services should be considered in a comprehensive and thorough manner.

S.B. 879, H.B. 6419 and H.B. 6420 regarding Task Forces to study DCF:

In relation to Raised Bill Numbers 879, 6419 and 6420 I would submit that there is overlap between some of the duties of the Advisory Council proposed by the Program Review and Investigations Committee in Section 6 of Bill 877 and that whatever is voted out of this Committee should be coordinated to avoid redundancies and the possibility of different policy

directions being formulated by different bodies. Perhaps the Advisory Council's initial role during this time of re-examination should be to advise and inform the work of the task forces envisioned. I would further recommend that there be one task force to look at all the issues proposed to be studied in these bills, including privatization, and that subcommittees to look at the specific issues be formed and their work coordinated. Policy decisions regarding prevention roles, privatization and leadership structure will obviously effect any recommendations regarding reorganization and what DCF's future strategic plans, outcome goals and reporting requirements will be.

H.B. 5915 An Act Concerning "Stuck Kids."

I support H.B. 5915 regarding Stuck Kids to the extent that this is not already being done by the Department and to the extent that the information the Department tracks should be relayed to the Select Committee on Children as an important oversight and accountability measure.

H.B. 6411 An Act Concerning the Reduction in Child Poverty and Investment in Prevention:

I enthusiastically support this bill and see it as an important step to thoughtfully implementing the laudable goals of C.G.S. §§ 4-67v and 4-67-x. Based upon my hope that the Children's Trust Fund will survive this legislative session, I am confident that the Office of Policy and Management will recognize the value of including the Children's Trust Fund's expertise in carrying out the directives of this bill. Much of the work and study that will inform the analysis required in this bill has already been carried out. I am confident that the Children's Trust Fund will survive due to recognition of its critical contribution in this state to the goals outlined in Section 2(b) of this bill. The Children's Trust Fund has already implemented and evaluated cost-effective programs that are successfully addressing the promotion of competent parenting; the development of socially and emotionally healthy children; maternal health and safety, connecting parents with child care, as well as vocational, educational and social service supports; ensuring school readiness; engaging fathers; and avoiding crisis.

I would therefore respectfully request that this bill be approved but amended to include the Children's Trust Fund as a collaborating or advisory agency with the Office of Policy and Management.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carolyn Signorelli