

Testimony to Appropriations Subcommittee Re: The Children's Trust Fund

February 11, 2010

Sen. Harp, Rep Geragosian and the members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mary Ellen Hass and I am the Senior Vice President of Family and Children's Agency in Norwalk. Family & Children's Agency is which is a multi-faceted social service agency serving over 10,000 children and adults each year through seven core areas of service.

I am here to day in support of the Nurturing Families Network component of the Children's Trust Fund. As you are aware, the Governor in her budget recommendations for 2010-2011 has recommended a 50% cut in funding to the Trust Fund which will drastically reduce the services offered to vulnerable, first time mothers in CT. For the past nine years, FCA has worked with the Trust Fund to implement the Nurturing Families Network (NFN) program. NFN works with first time mothers through three different components, to prevent child abuse and neglect and to ensure the healthy development of children born in the 26 birthing hospitals in CT. Those components include, Nurturing Connections which provides telephone support and referral services for first-time mothers screened as low-risk for child maltreatment; Nurturing Home Visits which provides weekly home visitation and case management services for high-risk families; and Nurturing Parenting Groups which are community-based parenting education and support groups for families at various risk levels. There are currently thirty-three NFN program sites statewide, ten of which are located in Hartford.

The key to the success of the NFN program is gaining the trust of families. After identifying hard-to-reach families through health-care and other community services, NFN workers follow up and assess the needs of the families, connecting them with community services, or providing face-to-face information on child development and parenting. A study of the pilot program found that during home visits, young parents more readily expressed their concerns, discussed options and accepted suggestions from NFN workers who they had grown to trust. Of particular importance was that many of the young mothers in the program said they understood child-rearing better after talking with NFN workers about what constituted normal child development and behavior at different ages.

The results of these cost effective, often life saving programs are abundantly clear. Child Abuse Prevention efforts not only work to save children from the devastating emotional and psychological effects of child maltreatment, but they save the state the exorbitant cost of providing services to families who have already become trapped in the cycle of abuse that often results in children being removed from their homes and dealing with a lifetime of trauma.

In a report prepared by the University of Hartford's Center for Social Research in December 2009, they note that since the inception of the NFN program in 1995, NFN workers across the state screened 42,827 first-time mothers, approximately one-third of all first-time births in the state. Of these families, 13,320 (31%) were found to be at risk for child abuse or neglect and 6,445 families received intensive home visiting services to prevent the devastating effects that accompany abuse and neglect.

The report goes on to note that families participating in the NFN program have shown statistically significant reductions in their risk for abuse, particularly in the area of rigid parenting. Annual rates of abuse and neglect for the NFN population have ranged from 1% to 6%, **well below** the 20-25% seen in other high-risk populations

In addition, families showed statistically significant increases in their awareness and use of resources in their communities. This means that parents are more likely to learn about their access to reliable transportation, budget their money better, and have more social interactions with friends and family. Also, employment rates increase significantly during participation in the NFN program, as do education levels. These types of behavior changes will ensure better long term success following their participation in the program.

In Fiscal year 2009, Family and Children's Agency served 294 families in all three components of our NFN Program. At all costs, we attempted to screen and work with women prenatally to reduce the incidence of low birth weight and prevent birth defects. The results were overwhelmingly positive. We found that of the 294 families we worked with:

- **100% of our pregnant mothers kept their prenatal and post natal appointments.**
- **100% of our pregnant mothers delivered a healthy baby at/or above 5.5 lbs and with an APGAR at or above 7.**
- **96% of the women we worked with did not have a repeat pregnancy within a year of their last baby's birth.**
- **98% of the families kept well baby checkups and their children's immunizations were up to date.**
- **100% of our parents demonstrated age appropriate parenting for infants and toddlers.**

Finally, self-reported child disciplinary practices suggested that most mothers were using non-disciplinary forms of discipline in their children's first year of life, while one-third reported using milder forms of "corporal punishment." As you can see, these families significantly reduced their risk for child maltreatment.

As the Legislature continues to challenge state agencies and community providers to use a Results Based Accountability approach to evaluating the success of services provided to vulnerable populations, it is clear that the design of the NFN programs has a solid evaluation component that can track and measure program effectiveness. It is also clear that investing in prevention not only saves lives but saves dollars that will be needed to treat vulnerable children and families who do experience the devastating trauma of child maltreatment.

Please consider the following as you make your decisions regarding appropriations: Family & Children's Agency has several DCF funded intervention programs for families who are referred following a substantiated report to DCF of abuse or neglect. Last fiscal year we served 92 families in **these programs**

that include Intensive Safety Planning, Intensive Family Preservation, Parent Aide Program and the Reconnecting Families Program. While the services in these programs vary, they are all intensive home based programs designed to intervene in families to keep children safely in their homes and provide their parents the skills necessary to prevent them from a repeat episode of abuse or neglect. Last year the cost per family in these programs was \$7,891/family. The cost per family to serve the 294 families in our NFN programs last year was \$949/family. A staggering difference! For every dollar we invest before a child is hurt and a family is broken we save countless dollars in revenue. But moreover, we save immeasurable trauma to that family and most importantly we break the cycle of abuse that if not prevented will continue for generations to come.

It is imperative to note that if this budget is passed with a 50% cut to the Children's Trust Fund resulting in a 30% reduction to the NFN programs statewide the results are clear. There will be 30% more families who are at high risk for maltreating their children and as a result, there will most certainly be an increase in reports to the DCF hotline and the referrals to intervention programs across the state. Not only will the seemingly endless cycle of abuse continue, it will most assuredly grow resulting in an increased cost of services and an increased number of children experiencing the lifelong trauma of abuse and neglect.

In a time when DCF is still under a court ordered consent decree, the department obviously has multiple challenges to face as they meet the growing and often complex needs of Connecticut's children. Now more than ever, it will important to maintain not reduce the prevention efforts in this state such as the NFN program, as they have demonstrated their cost effectiveness to successfully prevent child abuse and neglect thereby reducing the number of families that become involved with DCF.