

**Testimony of Laura Amenta
Chairperson, The Children's Trust Fund Council
135 Red Hill Drive, Glastonbury CT 06033 (860) 836-5800**

**Prepared for the Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing on Governor's March 1 Deficit Plan
Thursday, March 11, 2010**

Good afternoon Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriation Committee.

My name is Laura Amenta and I am the Chair of the Children's Trust Fund Council.

I am here today to testify on Governor Rell's Deficit Mitigation Plan, specifically her proposal to cut key programs of the Children's Trust Fund.

There is a remarkable and unique state-wide child abuse prevention program for first time parents in Connecticut that is being targeted for cutbacks. The Trust Fund's Nurturing Families Network (NFN) provides intensive home visitation services to more than 2,000 first-time parents at high risk of abuse or neglect. The program has an astonishing result. While 22 percent of high-risk new mothers end up on the caseloads of DCF, only 1.3 percent of those involved in NFN last year had substantiated cases of neglect and there were no cases of abuse.

The Governor's proposal would suspend funding to fourteen program sites in New Haven and Hartford – cutting \$880,000. For the New Haven 21 town region - 62% of poor children live directly in the City of New Haven. Likewise, for Hartford region – a 17 town region, 60% of the poor live directly in the City of Hartford. If these cutbacks go through there will only be three sites for two of our largest cities where poverty and vulnerability are concentrated.

The cost to the state of this proposal far outweighs the savings. Based on data collected by the University of Hartford's Center for Social Research, almost 700 mothers a year in Hartford and New Haven would lose services, 95% of whom are racial minorities, 91% single mothers, 76% unemployed, 50% with a history of abuse, and 46% without a high school education. According to University of Connecticut's Center for the Study of Culture, Health and Human Development, 20% of this group or 140 mothers will end up as DCF cases. Each case will cost the state about \$30,000 per year as opposed to the \$3,000 it costs for home visitation.

However, because abused and neglected children are at higher risk for later problems, there will be additional increasing costs to the state over the years in police, judicial, correctional and social services.

Because we are in a recession, these figures are conservative at-best and expectations are that the true costs will be much higher. For families, the devastating effects of a recession are not confined to economic struggles. Research demonstrates a strong correlation between poverty and child abuse and neglect. Drastic financial changes are also linked to increases in substance abuse, domestic violence and school drop-out rates. There is also concern that instances of shaken-baby syndrome may be rising as a result of caregiver's increased levels of stress and frustration over unemployment and layoffs. These are but a few examples of the complex interaction between economic hardship and risks to the safety and well-being of children. This is not the time to be cutting off vital services to vulnerable families.

I'd like to bring your attention to an equally important consideration – the cost to the state in terms of employment. The Governor's proposal will eliminate or reduce funding for 145 jobs in the City of New Haven and Hartford. These positions are contracted out to community organizations for hiring site staff such as home visitors. These are positions with modest salaries, so cuts will result in a high number of job losses per dollar saved.

Additionally the loss of these positions will destabilize the families we serve. NFN offers the child and family a steady source of support, which can both stabilize a child's life and improve the family's life outcomes. Families involved in NFN have made statistically significant gains in education, employment and income. One unique aspect of NFN is that it brokers multiple services to meet families' needs. Home visitors assess families and refer them to work training, educational opportunities and quality child care. Without the safety-net of NFN, destabilized families will be less likely to manage employment.

With the state's jobless rate up to nine percent, the highest yet in this recession, the state cannot afford to lose more jobs. And unlike many of the other private sector jobs being eliminated – it is within the legislature's authority to prevent these job losses and reductions.

Difficult fiscal times call for difficult decisions. But cutting programs that have demonstrated effectiveness through carefully designed research and eliminating programs and jobs where they are needed most is misguided. State money invested in the front end, saves money in the back end when families are diverted from far more expensive services needed to treat family dysfunction, juvenile delinquency, unemployment, poor health or educational problems.

I urge you to vote against this item in the Governor's deficit mitigation plan. That vote will save hundreds of children and millions of state dollars.

The Governor's March 1 Deficit Mitigation Plan would cut Nurturing Families Network (NFN) by \$880,000 resulting in the elimination of the following NFN sites in New Haven and Hartford:

Hartford sites:

Catholic Charities/Asylum Hill Family Center
Catholic Charities/ El Centro de Desarrollo Y Reafirmacion Familiar
Catholic Charities/ Southside Family Center
City of Hartford Maternal Infant Outreach Program
Hispanic Health Council
Parkville Family Center
RAMBUH Family Center
Families in Crises
VNA Health Care

New Haven Sites

The Children's Community Programs of CT Inc
City of New Haven Department of Health
Coordinating Council for Children in Crises, Inc.
Fair Haven Community Health Clinic Inc.
Hill Health Corporation

Note: Hartford and New Haven would be supported by the following sites: Hartford Hospital, Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, The Hospital of St Raphael, and Yale New Haven Hospital. However, since Hartford Hospital does screening, not home visitation, the only Hartford site providing NFN home visitation services would be Saint Francis.

CHILDREN'S TRUST FUND

...The Cost of Disinvesting in Child Abuse Prevention in Connecticut

A Crises in Funding

The Children's Trust Fund is the state's lead department for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Under Governor Rell's proposal, the Trust Fund's \$13 million state budget will be cut by \$6.9 million or 50%. Funding for home visitation would be eliminated for nine sites in Hartford, five sites in New Haven, and reduced by 30% for all other sites statewide. Also reduced by 30% would be prevention programs reaching families in prisons, domestic violence shelters, hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, public housing projects and funds provided to grandparents raising children as a court appointed guardians. Parent Leadership Training and Children's Legal Services would be eliminated.

Preventing Abuse in Severely At-Risk

Families served by the Trust Fund are high risk families who face many challenges. More than 50% of the mothers enrolled in our programs experienced severe maltreatment as children; roughly 40% showed signs of depression and about 35% had a history of substance abuse, mental illness, or criminal activity – putting them and their children at severe risk for child abuse and neglect.

Prevention Pays

Despite these challenges, the families engaged in Trust Fund programs make meaningful changes in their lives. Nurturing Families Network is a strategy that is making a difference. Its home visitation services help more families stay out of the child protective system.

Based on *The Cost of Child Abuse vs. Child Abuse Prevention: A Multi-year Follow-up in Michigan* for every \$1 spent on prevention, the state saves \$6 in remediation.

The Cost of Cutting Prevention

Trust Fund programs reach 18,000 families annually. Nurturing Families Network, the Trust Fund's most expensive program costs the state \$3,000 per family. Help Me Grow, its least expensive program costs the state just \$100 per family. Both are just a fraction of the \$30,000 it costs the state for one substantiated case of abuse or neglect.

The University of Connecticut Center for the Study of Culture, Health and Human Services estimates that the proposed erosion of Trust Fund prevention programs would result in more than 350 new cases of child abuse and neglect each year – costing the state \$10 million. From a fiscal standpoint the state will end up spending an additional \$3.5 million, just from the loss of Trust Fund Programs.

Cuts to Home Visitation act as an Anti-Stimulus to our State

Proposed cuts will drastically impact community providers and cut employment statewide. Cuts are expected to result in the loss of over 150 FTE positions and will place at risk the sustainability of many prevention sites across the state.

Prevention Works - Reversing the Cycle

The tide of abuse and neglect can be turned back. The current annualized rates of child abuse and neglect among program participants is under 1.4%, well below the expected 20% of a high-risk population.

Evaluations of Nurturing Families Network find the families served make statistically significant gains in parenting skills, education, employment, and income. Developmental delays and health issues are identified early through regular screenings.

There is evidence that home visitation improves school readiness. One study conducted by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found that children enrolled in preschool whose families participated in home visitation - scored significantly higher on all measures of intelligence, achievement, and language ability than children in comparison group whose families did not receive home visitation.

Research on home visitation shows long-term benefits. Early intervention reduces rates of tobacco and alcohol abuse, episodes of running away, behavioral problems, arrests, convictions, and sexual promiscuity among teenagers. (David Olds 15 year follow-up – Elmira Home Visiting Program 1998).