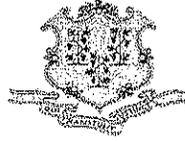


STATE OF CONNECTICUT



OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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TESTIMONY JEANNE M. MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE
February 23, 2011

Good afternoon to the members of the Appropriations Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

Let me begin by stating that my staff and I are very mindful of the state fiscal crisis and we are ready to share the necessary sacrifices. The national and statewide economic crisis profoundly impacts Connecticut's families and communities and state-funded programs will need to do more with significantly less. The OCA is an essential part of a solution to ensure that state dollars are used effectively and responsibly to safeguard the well-being of Connecticut's children.

Since 1995, the OCA has harnessed its unique statutory and independent authority to investigate and evaluate all state-funded and state operated programs, services, and institutions for children and make recommendations that protect the rights of Connecticut's children. OCA staff have responded to more than 10,000 calls from citizens, agency employees and legislators and conducted hundreds of investigations related to children who have received or should have received services from the many state-funded agencies and private providers responsible for their care.

The OCA's role is the very essence of government transparency and accountability. With a small budget and 8 actual positions, the Office provides taxpayers with independent, nonpartisan oversight and accountability of well over \$4 billion dollars of state funds across all branches of government. The OCA identifies costly and duplicative bureaucracy existing in state-run and state-funded agencies, facilities and services for children. Our recommendations have often saved significant funds through the reform of expensive practices and organizational infrastructures. OCA also is the safe haven for public officials, citizens, providers and state employees to report system failures that affect the health and safety of children. A small staff of highly specialized and expert professionals accomplishes the OCA's broad statutory mandate. The proposed budget significantly shrinks the resources of the OCA.

I have great confidence in Governor Malloy's leadership. I also have a great deal of optimism about his recent Executive appointments, including Commissioner Katz. I agree that the Governor and the Legislature share an obligation to ensure transparency and accountability for state agencies and state-funded programs that serve children and families. Additionally, I believe that reforms have been made on behalf of children over the last fifteen years across the numerous agencies under the OCA's statutory oversight.

I believe that the OCA, as the only entity with multidisciplinary expertise and experience to identify and respond to the needs of children across all agencies, systems of care and branches of government, can contribute to making more effective reforms in partnership with executive branch agencies, the Governor and the Legislature. The scope of the challenges facing Governor Malloy and you, the General Assembly, are immense. Even the boldest reforms will need time to become embedded in agency culture and infrastructure. At DCF, Commissioner Katz has the lionshare of

responsibility for children and decades of problems to understand and address. New leadership at the Departments of Correction, DMHAS, DSS and SDE will benefit from our expertise and experience. We will help make change for the hundreds of children who remain out-of-state, hundreds of adolescents who are at-risk while placed in chaotic and poorly functioning congregate care settings, young adults who are falling through the cracks as they transition between the child and adult systems of care.

The OCA stands ready to assist Commissioner Katz in her effort to relieve Connecticut from its federal oversight in the next year. We stand ready to provide support to sustain the practice and program reforms that convince the court to vacate the consent decree. We also look forward to channeling our resources to nurturing more intensely critical reforms at the multitude of other systems where the OCA is mandated to provide oversight.

Unlike all other agencies and leadership in Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of State government, the OCA has the staff expertise and the historical ability to see and analyze first hand the experience of children involved in our state-funded institutions and programs. Many of the reforms at the Departments of Children and Families, Correction, Mental Health and Addiction Services, Education and Public Health resulted directly from the OCA's investigations and advocacy. In many cases, these changes came about because the OCA uniquely identified ineffective, harmful and even fatal practices in state-funded children's programs and facilities. Ensuring the sustainability of reforms already accomplished also remains a daily aspect of OCA's work.

- As a result of the OCA's statutory access to information across all agencies and investigatory authority, many poorly functioning facilities have closed or undergone significant change. Examples include Haddam Hills Academy, Connecticut Juvenile Training School, Lake Grove at Durham, Stonington Institute, Riverview Hospital, High Meadows, Connecticut Children's Place, New Hope Manor and St. Vincent's Special Needs Group Homes for children with disabilities. Despite significant advances in the availability of home and community based services for children with complex needs, CT continues to depend heavily on facilities to provide care and treatment to a large number of children. Current oversight and quality assurance practices by DCF are fragile at best.
- The OCA's three-year investigation and data analysis of girls involved with DCF placed at the York Correctional Institution represents the first and only comprehensive review of Connecticut's child welfare to adult prison pipeline and lifted the veil on deplorable conditions of confinement and programming for children under age 18 incarcerated in our adult prisons.
- In July 2010, the OCA shared investigatory findings that revealed significant holes in the safety net at local school districts and SDE for protecting our children from abuse and neglect by school employees.

As I testify today, my staff is working on no less than two dozen active investigations that involve multiple agencies and systems. Child specific investigation and advocacy almost always is on behalf of a child or children with complex needs. All of these investigations were prompted because OCA alone, with its independent authority and highly specialized, multidisciplinary staff, has the expertise and access to information to develop a complete picture of a child's needs across all domains of that child's life and a complete picture of systemic functioning across all agencies and branches of government.

Today, we have new, bold leadership in Governor Malloy and his Commissioners. The OCA stands ready to work together with the new administration to share our expertise, unique knowledge, and recommendations for the ways that all of Connecticut's systems can spend wisely to improve

outcomes for our children. We are a necessary component to finally exiting decades of federal court oversight and sustaining required reforms at DCF with the support of the new leadership. We are a necessary resource to assist DMHAS and DDS as their caseloads and demands for services to young adults and children with special needs grows and as they begin to return clients back to Connecticut from out-of-state placements. The OCA's expertise and experience is necessary to ensure that the unique re-entry needs of youth who are discharged from our adult prisons are part of our state's criminal justice reform.

I ask you to sustain the value of OCA.

It is critically important for the children to maintain a truly independent oversight and accountability entity.

I thank you for your past and future support.