



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman
Executive Director
Connecticut Commission on Children

Appropriations Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

March 1, 2011

**Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Representative Dillon, Senator Welch,
Representative Miner and Members of the Committee**

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children. The General Assembly created the Commission on Children through Section 46a-126 of the General Statutes with bipartisan support.

Children are the only investment in our state that just keeps growing. Their growth is Connecticut's growth. When there is a disinvestment in children, the moral compass points downward. There is also a jarring effect on competitiveness. Our state feels this now.

Children are not a special interest constituency group. They are our next adults and workers. Thousands of these children and youth need an entity representing them. But they cannot vote and have no voice up here.

The Commission on Children is mandated to advance public policies in the best interest of children. In our work, we 1) develop landmark policies for children, 2) bring dollars and donated skills to the state, 3) lead in public information for children and youth, 4) perform key research on children's needs, 5) bring the family to government and government to the family, and 6) are recognized as the best coordinating entity for children in the nation.

The Commission performs the following functions for the state:

Entrepreneurs for Children and Families

In a time of austerity, our agency brings in significant dollars to the state for children and their families. This year we brought in \$16 million dollars. As our FY11 agency budget is under \$360,000 after holdbacks, the state gained \$45.00 for every dollar we received. This is a good return on investment in bad times.

Examples - It was our agency that learned of the potential of the TANF Emergency Fund. We held forums, brought in the national experts, met with the executive branch and the legislature. When we were told the state would not get enough money and would not be eligible, we knew this was wrong and continued to organize. Though this incurred the antipathy of some, our state brought in 39 million dollars. Our agency is directly responsible, with Representative Toni Walker, for over 15 million of these dollars. For months before any green light on this fund, we created the model, helped people visualize, and brought unexpected stakeholders in to creatively piece the puzzle together.

And dollars for dollars sake is not good enough. These funds helped with subsidized employment, youth programs for the summer, innovations in manufacturing, innovations at the community college level linking students to job training, as well as training in new green/energy careers with CBIA. We brought in the foundations, worked with the non profits and created partnerships where there were none to develop a fiscal paradigm that would lend itself to the state's application. After significant pressure and media exposure, our state applied for these federal funds.

This year we are working with funders to bring higher technological instruments into reading assessment in the classroom. With the highest achievement gap in reading in the nation, our assessments and interventions are clearly questionable. We are in conversation with business and philanthropy, and hope to raise one million dollars for this effort.

We also are working to build dollars for teacher training in anti-bully models. With the recent suicide in New Jersey and the ensuing untimely deaths in New England, our schools are truly ready for the best models of anti-bullying. We hope to raise \$250,000 for this work so that children will feel safe while learning, a matter of deep and critical right.

We take every opportunity to inform you of federal financing opportunities as well as raising dollars to bring to agencies. These dollars do not come to our agency. They go to other state agencies and towns. Other examples include:

- SNAP 50/50 Match Funds to maximize federal funds with 50 cents to the dollar reimbursement for poverty reduction, employment and training implementation in towns. This will yield 4-6 million dollars per year upon federal approval. USDA/FNS announced last week that the first collaborative is about to be approved.
- Urban Issues and Children in Hartford focused on child obesity reduction, parent engagement and low birth weight. \$120,000
- Community and philanthropic dollars for parent engagement and family civics. \$500,000 matching funds
- Pew support for a state conference with business leaders on early education. \$10,000
- A media campaign, 'starring' Coach Calhoun, on the Playbook for Prevention. \$1,000,000 of grants and in-kind support

Model policy design

We staff you frequently on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states. Recently this has included the work on children and the recession. We knew it was key to understand how children fared under a recession. We met with economists, studied recessions and children, brought in the scholars and over time, realized that an additional 35,000 children were going to fall into poverty in our state costing children and the state over 800 million dollars per year.

We worked with the Speaker of the House, helped to create a Task Force, wrote the first bill in the nation on this issue and were praised as a best state with best practice by the National Conference of State Legislatures. Marion Wright Edelman flew in to support our state and its leadership on this issue. Thus far two states have copied our bill.

Of most importance, our work has led to improved efficiencies, more food programs opening up, changes in child care law and strong attention to a seamless system of service delivery. This legislation captured the problems in service delivery in the state after seven hearings throughout Connecticut with families coming forward.

Innovators

We innovate new practice where the gap is too large and nothing has filled it. When it was clear that families were not part of government and government did not reach families, we designed the first family civics initiative for parents in the country, called the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). This initiative gives parents the tools and confidence to be voices for children in their schools, communities and state. Over the past decade,

PLTI graduates have generated \$1.1 million in volunteer time.

PLTI was formally recognized by Congress as one of the top ten innovative practices in all the states and was honored by the Ford Foundation and Good Housekeeping Magazine.

The model has gone statewide and is now being replicated in 9 other states. The national Kellogg Foundation is interested in giving our state money for this model. It is a Connecticut invention, like the best of tools made in New Britain.

The Commission speaks for children. We galvanize resources, constituents and unexpected stakeholders for good child outcomes.

Accountants on Cost Effectiveness

We designed our state's return on investment Stock Portfolio for Children, which is in your packets. This was conducted well before this recession to advise you what is cost effective and successful for children. This was not done based on other states. It is a state return on investment for Connecticut.

Triage and Ambulance

When twelve roof tops were collapsing or threatening to collapse on child care centers this winter from ice, our agency convened homeland security, the health department, the federal office of emergency preparedness and Save the Children to establish protocols, determine how to save the small businesses, help ensure child safety and determine what policies needed to be put in place. A bill has already been heard in the Select Committee on Children on this matter. It was the Commission on Children's work on children and terrorism that led to Congress' national entity on Children and Disaster in Washington, DC.

Scholars on best research and practices

For example we analyzed:

- The impact of both 9/11 and Katrina on the children in our state. This research went national as the most in-depth study of natural and unnatural disaster on children. It was used by Congress and in our state and led to the only legislation in the nation on children and unnatural disaster.
- How long children were waiting in foster care for adoption. These findings propelled our states comprehensive adoption bill.
- The impact of racial integration in the early years on children's notion of difference. This led to strong integrated early preschool programming.
- The impact of school readiness in the kindergarten classroom. This study became the base for our current analysis of preschool programs.

Agents of trend analysis and results based accountability

We have been analyzing trends and bringing them to you for 15 years in The Social State of Connecticut, which we created with Senator Larson. We wrote the first bill for a state on trend analysis with a requirement to look at the social health of a state and to use this as a civic tool for the public on accountability and transparency. The index looks at what is and is not working over a thirty year trend line.

Leaders on prevention rather than crisis

The Commission on Children wrote the cutting-edge bill on prevention with the Speaker that shifts our budget from crisis to prevention for children and requires the Governor to give a report on prevention spending in his state address.

We have led on prevention, rather than crisis as a way to work with all children and youth in this state. It offers dignity, cost savings and true outcomes. Other states are replicating this strategy.

We studied how to talk about prevention most effectively and designed a major Game Plan on Prevention with Coach Calhoun. This was on television, radio, print - all from dollars we raised. The Playbook for Prevention is a best seller for the state, at no cost to you. It is also in your packets.

We serve as the bridge between the community, family and the state

We average 350 calls per week from local citizens and parents, 800 hits on our website per week and 30 requests per week from state and local policy leaders.

We distribute more than 180 products per day to the public on children's development. This ranges from products for every new parent in hospitals, in both English and Spanish, to shirts with immunization schedules, to booklets on the importance of reading to children. Our products are also used in other states due to their clarity, access and art designs.

Statewide, we partner with mayors on children's issues, reach youth and parents, work with grandparents, help the librarians, and work with the police.

Partners with you, as well as Congress and national experts

We staff you on policies that have been the first of their kind or model laws for the states. These include school readiness, the Parent Trust Act, Homeland Security and Children Act, the SNAP E&T (formerly FSET) 50/50 match law bringing dollars into our state in a match of 50 cents to the dollar.

We work extensively with our Congressional delegation on early brain research, school readiness, early reading, homeland security and children, and federal fund maximization.

I serve as the Staff Chair for the National Conference of State Legislature's Committee on Human Services and Welfare. In this role, I have opportunity to access and study best practices in all fifty states, which I bring home.

Staffing

We made a commitment to build this agency so that you had the most exceptional staff for your child planning and child policy needs. Our small staff of six includes a former staff member of the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families under Congressman George Miller and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, the former head of the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, a former news reporter from a reputable daily newspaper, and a former planning director in the executive branch. We have two bi-lingual staff members to reach growing populations in our state. I myself was chief of staff for all of family policy for the state of California under Speaker Willie Brown and staff to the human services committee on child care, poverty reduction and all of human services.

These combined staff skills lead to exceptional research, outstanding products, consumer design that truly reaches the public across educational level, high acumen in public policy, strategic sense and an understanding of each branch of government and the community.

We are proud of building this for you and are at your service.

Consolidation?

Sometimes it is easier to wipe out a small agency in its entirety than to delve into larger agencies to look for efficiency or to explore revenue generation. Often however, those small agencies are the most efficient operations around. At times like this we are an easy target. Though an odd target, as we are less than half of 1% of the total budget.

Unlike most agencies, our agency was cut 51% in the last budget cycle. Then further holdbacks cut us more. What was \$1.1 million in FY09 became \$357,000 in FY11. Our total cut was 66.2%. All staff take furlough days weekly. Most contribute free work hours, focused on goals for children. We are working at 3.4 FTE.

The Commission on Children understands the hard times we are in. For the past two years, we have raised the difference, in a public-private partnership, from individual donors, business and philanthropy to stay afloat. And we continue to lead on child policy, national networks and funds for our state.

We request the proposed budget allocation of \$729,408. This is an approximate 31% cut from our original budget. It will allow us to continue bringing resources in to the state, innovate best practice and ensure model policy. We can assure a return on investment in both quality and dollars. What you allocate will likely be tripled, at minimum this year.

Children historically are lost in hard times. This is not the time to cut out or consolidate the agency that, for less than 90 cents per child, promotes their health, safety, and learning.

Thank you.

Whatever the issue may be, the Commission seeks out the authoritative information, identifies the knowledgeable leaders in the field and defines the best practices. In doing so, the Commission informs the legislative process and the general public on those policies that have proven effective in advancing the health and well being of children. If we didn't have the Commission, we would have to invent it."

-- Peter Libassi, formerly of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare



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The Connecticut Commission on Children: One Smart Little Investment

The Commission on Children 1) develops landmark policies for children, 2) brings dollars and donated skills to the state, 3) leads in media for children and youth, 4) performs key research on children's needs, 5) brings the family to government and government to the family, 6) is recognized as the best coordinating entity for children in the nation. This costs the state 90 cents per child.

"Whatever the issue may be, the Commission seeks out the authoritative information, identifies the knowledgeable leaders in the field and defines the best practices. In doing so, the Commission informs the legislative process and the general public on those policies that have proven effective in advancing the health and well being of children. If we didn't have the Commission, we would have to invent it." - Peter Libassi, Former Counsel, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

Mandate

Public Act 85-584 created the Commission in 1985. An arm of the Legislative Branch, the Commission is mandated to promote public policies in children's best interest.

Cutting Edge Track Record

Landmark Legislation-- The Commission guided the following legislation for policy leaders-- from research, to public interviews to systems design:

- **School Readiness** legislation that developed preschool and a statewide infrastructure for quality early care and education. Public Act 97-259
- **Early Reading Success** law that provided school options for reduced class size, full day kindergarten and school reading plans. Public Act 98-243
- **The Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative** to re-engage absent parents with their children. Public Act 99-193
- **Adoption reform** promptly placing young children in permanent caring homes. Public Act 00-137
- **The Safe Learning Act** to ensure safe learning in school and to reduce child aggression. Public Act 01-1, June Special Session

- **The Prevention Initiative** that shifts the state budget from crisis to prevention with proven programs that work early and well for children and youth. Public Act 01-121.
- **The Parent Trust Act**, a parent engagement initiative to maximize family input and participation in policy at the school, neighborhood, and state level. Public Act 01-2, June Special Session
- **The Children and Homeland Security Act**, the only state law in the nation addressing the needs of children in natural and unnatural disaster. Special Act 02-8
- **Lead Action** for Medicaid Primary Prevention Pilot reduces lead hazards in dwellings of low-income children at risk for lead poisoning. Public Act 00-216
- **The Child Poverty Reduction Law** seeks to reduce poverty among children by 50% within the next decade. Benchmarks and accountability measures are included. Public Act 04-238
- **The Children and Recession Law**-the first bill of its kind to study the impact of the recession on children. Replicated in two other states and lauded by NCSL as a best state practice. Public Act 10-133

“The Commission, by nearly all accounts, performs a valuable catalyzing and coordinating role on behalf of better and better-coordinated services to young children and their families. Known for its facility at mobilizing both public and private stakeholders and creating effective public education campaigns, the Commission is perhaps most valuable as an influential advisor to all branches of government and as a site for the negotiations of state and family and child policy.” – from *Coming Together for Children and Families: How Cabinet-level Collaboration is Changing State Policymaking*, published by the Family Impact Seminar

A Smart Return on Investment

The Commission on Children generates federal and private dollars at 48 times its current budget. The vast majority of these funds do not return to the Commission, but rather support initiatives at the state and local level.

Recent examples include:

- Best urban practices for children and youth in Hartford focused on child obesity reduction, parent engagement, and low birth-weight. *\$200,000*
- SNAP 50/50 match funds to maximize federal funds with 50 cents to the dollar reimbursement for poverty reduction implementation in towns. *\$4-6 million per year, upon federal approval; USDA/FNS announced last week that the first collaborative is about to be approved*
- The TANF Emergency Fund- an incentive grant from Congress that impacts subsidized employment and emergency services. *\$15 million*

- Pew support for a statewide conference to bring business leaders together with early childhood on Closing Connecticut's Achievement Gap: Getting It Right...from the Start. *\$10,000.*
- Community and philanthropic dollars for parent engagement and family civics. *\$500,000 matching funds*
- Pilot reading assessment instrument to promote teacher –friendly and time saving technology with improved range and assessment details. *One million dollars, pending*
- Bullying training in schools in research based practices. *\$250,000, pending*
- A media campaign on prevention 'starring' Coach Calhoun on the Playbook and Game Plan on Prevention. *One million dollars of grants and in-kind support.*

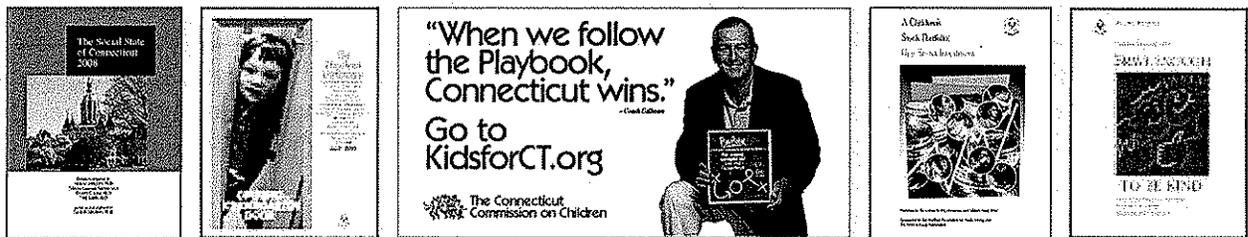
“Business has partnered with the Commission on Children for more than ten years. Linking the development of the child to competitiveness, quality of life and the overall strength of the economy, business leaders meet quarterly to discuss child policy issues. The business community, across small, international, corporate and moderate size businesses have been most active in school readiness, safety and prevention policy for the youngest generation. This is believed to be the most efficient, with the best outcomes for the broadest reach of children.”
 -- David E.A. Carson, Retired CEO, People's Bank

Reaching the Public

The Commission's 2010 outreach included:

- A forum on bullying that drew more than 500 students, parents, educators, and government officials to the Legislative Office Building. The keynote speaker was U.S. Assistant Education Secretary Kevin Jennings, the Obama administration's point person on bullying. The event drew widespread media coverage, including reports that night on four television stations.
- A roundtable discussion where Kevin Concannon, U.S. Undersecretary of Agriculture for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, discussed ways the federal government can assist Connecticut in reducing family poverty.
- A visit to the Capitol by child advocate and civil rights leaders Marian Wright Edelman, who spoke to lawmakers on the impact of the recession on children.
- A multi-disciplinary forum to discuss ways to identify and prevent traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Participants included Dr. Joshua Cantor, co-director of the Brain Injury Research Center at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.
- Distributing 40,000 Department of Public Health immunization packets to new mothers statewide.

- Distributing more than 25,000 copies of the Commission's own booklets for parents on how to prepare their children for school, select the right day care, help their children learn to read, and keep their children healthy. These are published in English and Spanish.
- Drawing 166,000 visitors to its website, www.cga.ct.gov/coc, with nearly 100,000 documents being downloaded in PDF format.
- Publishing an e-newsletter that has more than 1,300 subscribers.
- Serving as an important resource to Connecticut's news media on children's issues. Commission. The executive director serves as a regular guest on weekday morning programming on WVIT-TV, NBC Connecticut.



Targeted Policy Research

- Released the comprehensive infant toddler policy study, *First Words, First Steps* to the Governor. Harvard University cites this as most comprehensive in the states.
- Established the first *Social State of Connecticut* that reports to the General Assembly and public each year on key social and health indicators affecting quality of life
- Coordinated longitudinal research on the implications of preschool on the achievement gap and K-3 teacher training in reading and school performance;
- Analyzed the impact of bullying in schools and neighborhoods;
- Compiled with Yale University international and national research on the elimination of race bias through early exposure to diversity among young children;
- Determined the impact of parent engagement on child outcomes and community;
- Assessed the impact of terrorism and Hurricane Katrina on children. Authored a report used nationally on children and natural and unnatural disaster.

Leadership Development and Capacity-Building

The Commission builds the skills of the public to improve public input and participation in state government. This includes:

- An ongoing partnership with mayors on School Readiness;
- A nationally recognized Parent Leadership Training Institute in 16 towns and cities to help parents become advocates for their children and other children. Parents volunteer 8 hours a month upon graduation;
- A partner with business leaders on competitiveness and child policy implications;
- A website for children and youth to access information on civics, government, and history;
- A prevention advisory comprised of judges, mayors and child policy experts to review prevention and expand its potential for cost savings and proven outcomes.
- A model partnership with superintendents and parents, teaching both parent and school leaders how to partner to promote school excellence. Parents Supporting Educational Excellence Initiative is in nine Connecticut cities.

National and State Network

The Executive Director was nominated by the National Conference of State Legislatures to be the national Staff Chair for Human Services and Welfare. This allows quick-access to best practice and research for Connecticut.

The rest of the staff brings a wide variety of expertise. The Legislative Liaison formerly worked for two members of Congress and the Child Welfare League. The Development Director was the former head of Peace Corps for Dominican Republic. The Family Policy and Leadership Coordinator was a former Director of Strategic Planning at the Department of Social Services. The Media Director worked previously for the Journal Inquirer newspaper of Manchester.

Honors

The Commission on Children was selected by a U.S. Senate subcommittee last year as one of four entities to testify on the state of the child.

The Executive Director was awarded the Women in Government Award by Good Housekeeping Magazine for her innovations in parent engagement and leadership.

The news program "60 Minutes" studied the work of the Commission and included findings in a report on the economy and children in 2010.

The SNAP E&T collaborative model was recognized in 2010 by Harvard University as a Best Practice in Government.

