

March 4, 2011

Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Caroline Mavridis, and I am a resident of Vernon. I am writing to urge that you decline the Governor's proposed 25% cut to the Children's Trust Fund. CTF, whose mission is the prevention of child abuse and neglect, weathered substantial budget cuts in the last round. The Trust Fund has already given up 20% of its budget and lost 50% of its staff over the past two years. Once again its signature program, Nurturing Families Network, is being specifically targeted. If enacted, the cuts would close a third of all NFN sites, leaving Hartford and New Haven, two of the state's poorest cities, with only three NFN sites each, and badly underserved.

Based on recent data from the Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford, the cuts to NFN would mean nearly 700 mothers a year in Hartford and New Haven would lose services. Nearly all are racial minorities, about three fourths are unemployed, and about half do not have a high school degree. This is a highly vulnerable population.

The proposal to defund the "non-hospital sites" as opposed to the sites based in birthing hospitals has no basis in terms of the performance or quality of staffing. It can be a very blurry distinction when we observe that, for example, the proposal would defund the Hill Health Center in New Haven, and the Hispanic Health Council here in Hartford. All of the NFN home visitors are skilled professionals, who undergo a year of intensive training, so they will not easily be replaced at a later date when funds are replenished.

The most intensive portion of NFN is its educational home visiting program, which is provided to new parents determined to be at the highest risk of child abuse. Over 6,500 families have taken part in it since 1995. Home visitors use the most recent, research-based curricula to help parents improve their parenting skills as well as their own education and work situations.

NFN works. Findings from the University of Hartford show that annual rates of abuse for home visited families are only 1-6%, drastically lower than the 20-25% seen in comparable groups who do not receive home visiting. Parents make better use of their own supports, use better financial planning, attain higher rates of employment, and higher educational attainment. Because of NFN they are becoming less and less dependent on state resources, as they achieve a "healthy self-reliance." This is a bipartisan goal. This is how we help an economy recover.

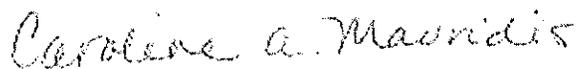
How much does NFN really cost, and how much would it cost to reduce its capacity to reach families? NFN is not only effective in preventing abuse and improving family circumstances, it is cost-effective as well. A year of home visits for one family costs about \$3,000 dollars. Compare this to about \$30,000 for a year of mandatory DCF oversight when that same child, without the benefit of a home visitor, becomes a substantiated "case" of abuse. A conservative estimate made by our Center here at UCONN is as follows. Closing the

non-hospital program sites, as I noted, will render 700 new mothers without home visiting services. Remember, too, that, on average, the rate of abuse is 20-25% in comparable, non-home visited populations. This means of that 700 families who will lose NFN services, 140 can be expected to enter the DCF case load *in the coming year – costing the state 4.2M in mandated DCF spending, and canceling out the proposed 3.2M to be saved.* The costs don't stop here. CT will forfeit over \$12M in federal funding if CTF's NFN budget is cut below 95% of its 2010 state appropriation. Specifically, NFN needs to be funded at about 9.9M to meet the requirement, or CT will be forced to repay, or pay penalties on, the \$800,000 it has already received.

In no way should we downplay the fiscal crisis in which the state currently finds itself. However, we are also in a critical moment for the well-being of young families, who are striving day to day to make ends meet and want to be the best parents they can be. All counties, even the traditionally "better off" ones, have seen a dramatic rise in poverty, as indexed by a 20-40% rise in use of food stamps from 2007-09. Poverty, and the increased stress that accompanies it, has long been understood as a key factor in raising a parent's risk of committing child abuse. "Tough" choices should never involve stripping away an efficient organization such as CTF, whose programs are nationally recognized for preventing child abuse.

Last year, after all arguments were heard, the legislature wisely voted to maintain all of CTF's funding, including for NFN. Please follow this precedent and keep our state a leader in prevention of child abuse. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



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