

Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget
Human Services

March 4th, 2011

Madam Chair(s) and members of the committee:

It is with gratitude that I sit before you today. I am Alison Mundy, Director of Development at the Children's Law Center of Connecticut. The Children's Law Center provides legal representation and family mediation services to children living in poverty. These are children who, through no fault of their own, are embroiled in difficult, protracted divorce, custody and visitation disputes. Our cases typically involve allegations of mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration and domestic abuse. The children's homes, and lives, are in chaos. Without the Children's Law Center, these children would have no voice and no representation of their best interests while their parents fight it out in family court. Today the organization serves six court jurisdictions throughout the state.

The need for service is undisputed and growing. The Children's Law Center was founded in 1993, after a six year-old girl was murdered by her own father during a court-ordered supervised visitation session. The determination was made that the little girl was un-served by a system which provided no advocates for the **children** of high-conflict family court cases. Today the Children's Law Center has grown to serve nearly 3,000 children annually through its combined programs. The funding we receive from the State of Connecticut is critical to our operating budget.

Our programs save the state money by keeping cases out of court. 90% of our cases last year ended in settlement or agreement, substantially unburdening the family court system. Of the cases where orders were entered, our attorneys' recommendations were reflected 99% of the time. Over 50% of the referrals to our free legal help line come from DCF, 2-1-1 Infoline, court and the Office of the Child Advocate. By providing information and answers to these callers, they are subsequently better prepared and navigate more efficiently when they do enter the court system. The Children's Law Center's programs help parents living at or below the poverty line create and reach agreements out of court, saving both time and money for the family court system. Our budget figures show our actual cost of representing a child in court averages \$750 per child and \$1,982 per case. It is certain the burden to the state would be substantially greater without our intervention. Our Legal Representation program is currently operating at capacity and closed for intake. We are often forced to decline cases that are in dire need of our services. While we appreciate very sincerely the governor's recognition of the value of our work, we

respectfully request our contract be renewed in its full amount, at \$150,000. The governor's proposed budget reflects an amount reduced by the former governor's mitigation plan.

Attached to this testimony you will find a copy of our line item in the proposed budget. The organization is listed in the Governor's Prevention Budget, under Department of Social Services, as Children's Legal Services. Please consider restoring not only our name, Children's Law Center, but our full funding as well.

Thank you.