

**Testimony of Gabriel Fonseca, Program Manager
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Public Hearing – March 4, 2011
Public Hearing on the Governor’s Budget**

My name is Gabriel Fonseca, Program Manager of a **DSS Certified Fatherhood Initiative program and three Children’s Trust Fund programs at Madonna Place, Inc.**, family support agency in Norwich. The desired result of our services is that children in New London County will develop in safe and nurturing families. We conduct in home education with first time parents, educational groups for fathers, and we provide individualized case management to mothers and fathers. I am here today in opposition of the Governor’s proposed budget that calls to eliminate the Fatherhood Initiative Program and scale back support for the Nurturing Families Network.

The state savings of \$195,000 by eliminating the Fatherhood Initiative Program will have lasting and costly implications. These funds are needed for the state to continue the federally funded Promoting Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage services. This grant requires the state to match at minimum \$195,000. The rationale that the match is no longer needed because the federal grant lapses this year is short sighted. The fed has indicated plans to grant extensions to current grantees but without the match our state may lose this opportunity. Also, there are efforts to create the next wave of federal dollars for fatherhood and those grants will also include a required match. If fatherhood is no longer clearly visible on its own line, in our state budget, we will not sustain federal support. The proposed budget plan sends a negative message about our state’s priorities.

For over 12 years, our State leads the nation in designing, developing and certifying fatherhood services. The legacy of State Representative, John S. Martinez who passed away in 2002 has been strong. John pioneered the Fatherhood Initiative of Connecticut legislation in 1999. He knew the importance of a father’s interaction with his child and fought to develop public policies that benefit fathers and their families. Another major implication of cutting this initiative would be that this legislative body will be responsible for stopping the productive work here in the state and in a sense bring to an end the legacy of Mr. Martinez.

Our fatherhood program has held the John S. Martinez Award for Program Excellence since the certification process was implemented. Currently we are one of 10 certified fatherhood programs. All of these programs help fathers in a strength based manner. We understand the difficult issues families face and we use theory and proven best practices to help those in need. The certified programs collaborate with the Department of Children & Families, Department of Correction, Department of Labor, Department of

Mental Health & Addition Services, Department of Public Health, and the State Department of Education; community-based agencies/programs serving fathers and families; faith-based partners; experts in child development; women's and men's advocates; representatives from judicial branch divisions; Greater Hartford Legal Aid; community technical colleges; Commission on Children; and The Consultation Center at Yale University.

Our program in Norwich is the only certified fatherhood program east of Hartford. Losing \$32,000 from our budget will greatly hinder our ability to support fathers as we do now. We operate in a braided funding manner. We raise funds and we have grants from numerous entities. Yet, our program's foundation is the Fatherhood Initiative grant. Families, community providers, and the greater community rely on us. They all will be impacted by this loss. Without our support there would be no formal options for fathers in Eastern Connecticut. Over the past 5 years our program alone supported over 150 men as they secured employment, over 250 men have used our services to set up formal parenting plans for custody and visitation, nearly 300 men have made payments on child support arrears, and most importantly over 600 families were positively impacted by our work with dads. Overall, we helped a large number of parents meet the needs of their children. In these tough economic times, I have seen a steady increase in people looking for help. The simple fact is more and more people need help. For over 20 years, Madonna Place, Inc. has been a respectable business that helps people. Our business is a staple in the city of Norwich and beyond. Our agency employees over 20 staff members, we provide volunteer and educational training opportunities as well. All of our staff members are compensated a living wage and contribute to our local and state economy.

I ask you to weigh the consequences of cutting fatherhood programs and Nurturing Families Network programs in Hartford and New Haven that have shown to make a difference. If the current budget plan was implemented our agency will be left with significant less resources to meet the demands for services. Thus, jobs will be eliminated or scaled back and in turn less people will receive the support they need to manage these tough times. If our agency is forced to eliminate jobs, one may assume that the other certified fatherhood programs will also eliminate jobs. Is our state ready to add more people to the already over crowded pool of unemployed Connecticut residents? Is our state leadership now saying that jobs are not important to our economy? I don't think that is the intent. Please consider all this as you make budget decisions. In closing, the saving will not be as grand as the costs of cutting services to fathers and their families. The answer to our fiscal problems is to increase revenue streams. There are various ways to do so and I am open to talking about this more and trust you will make an informed decision. Fathers and families are counting on you!

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