

Written Testimony of Joette Katz
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Senator Looney, Representative Janowski, Senator Fassano, Representative Piscopo, and members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee, thank you for this opportunity today to talk about my priorities as Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families and about my professional experiences. It is a great honor to have received Governor Malloy's appointment and to be given this tremendous opportunity and challenge.

Let me start with my professional experience and background. Up until January 5, 2011, I sat on the Connecticut Supreme Court -- a post to which then Governor Lowell P. Weicker Jr. first nominated me in 1992. I was thereafter reappointed by then Governors John G. Rowland and M. Jodi Rell. In 1989, then Governor William A. O'Neill nominated me to the Superior Court bench. On two occasions, once from 1994 to 2000 and again more recently from 2005 to 2010, I served as the administrative judge for the state appellate system, which includes the Supreme Court, the Appellate Court, and various support offices. There I oversaw policy, budgeting, purchasing, and personnel issues. Prior to my service on the bench, I was the chief of legal services of the Office of the Chief Public Defender from 1983 to 1989 in charge of all criminal appeals filed by indigent convicted persons. I served as an assistant public defender from 1978 to 1983 handling appeals and trials in Bridgeport. Before that, I was an associate at Winnick Vine and Welch in Shelton.

I know that some may question my experience in child welfare or in administering a large organization. First, let me say that being an outsider to a system that calls for improvement and reform is not a liability. A fresh eye to the challenges we face in Connecticut's child welfare system is certainly appropriate. An infusion of energy and new thinking offers growth and development.

In addition, there is no lack of experience and expertise to draw upon as we begin this journey. I have spent the last 6 weeks speaking to many people who work with the Department to get their input on where we need to focus our reform activities. I also have convened a transition team of experts to act as my eyes and ears reaching out to the community to identify what the Department is doing right and doing wrong. The mission of the transition team is to identify the issues, connect with the experts, and recommend activities to move the Department forward. I have found that the advocacy, clinical, professional, and legal communities together have immense expertise to bring to bear on how we serve children and families, and I plan to draw upon these communities freely.

I will also be surrounded by the best administrators and experts at the Department. I intend for my management team to feature individuals with outstanding experience and knowledge. There are many dedicated, talented and experienced men and women at the Department who will be centrally involved in all our efforts. Let me assure you, I will not be alone in this work -- but rather will convene a large team of smart and experienced people.

Finally, as a former public defender, judge and justice, I am familiar with the pertinent laws and regulations and the communities DCF serves.

Separate and aside from my career in the law, I also have had a rich experience that has been instrumental in stoking my passion for this challenge and that led me to embrace this opportunity presented to me by Governor Malloy. For several years, I have been blessed to be a mentor to four children in foster care. I have learned a great deal from these children -- first and foremost that we owe children in foster care everything we can muster. I also have learned to listen to foster families and have learned firsthand how we need to listen to our children and families. I intend to do that as commissioner and to support Department staff in doing that.

Let me then turn to why I am here before you today and what my vision for the Department is. I accepted Governor Malloy's appointment because, simply put, this is a special moment in time. In talking to so many people involved with child welfare in Connecticut, there is a consensus that we can turn a corner with the right kind of leadership and some significant encouragement and restructuring. The progress we want will not be easy and it may not be as quick as we would like. But it can and must be done.

The Department is not the same as it once was: caseloads are lower; services are more available; and permanency for children in foster care is more timely.

But I also want to be clear about this: we should not be satisfied with the Department's current way of doing business in some critical areas. No one in Connecticut can be satisfied that after 20 years we remain under federal court supervision. Too many children are in care -- let us remember that once a child enters the system that child is never the same. Too many children in care are not living with a family. Too many children live in non relative foster homes. Too many needs are unmet, and family engagement is not where it needs to be if we are truly to build upon family strengths.

We must do better, and, to do so, we must have clear expectations about our work, organization and staff. We need to rigorously explore significant organizational changes. I am committed to bringing the motivation, focus and follow-through that success requires. We need to change how we conduct ourselves in some fundamental ways, and so my administration of the Department will be very different from what we have seen in the past.

Indeed, because I think this is a critical time for the Connecticut child welfare system, we should pose the very question of "what will be different?"

First and foremost, my administration will be distinguished by its focus on communication and transparency. There are a few key areas on which I intend to concentrate energies, and each clusters around communication and transparency -- how we at the Department relate to and treat others.

I am going to start with where it matters most: how we relate to families. I believe that we have become too adversarial in our approach. This is counterproductive because, in most cases, family represents a child's greatest source of strength. A collaborative approach that fully engages families in identifying and implementing solutions is the best way to reach positive outcomes for children. I am encouraged

that the Department's own evaluation activities, including the Connecticut Comprehensive Outcomes Review, have identified the need to improve the level of engagement and partnership with families.

If we more successfully engage families, I am confident outcomes will be different and better. Treatment planning will benefit from more family involvement, and services will be more responsive to family needs. Relatives will more readily serve as a resource and, where children can not remain safely with biological parents, relatives will more often provide care.

In the effort to find more foster families, we should start by working more effectively with families so that more relatives care for children when needed. Already in my first days in office, we are working to improve how we license relative foster care homes. Annie E. Casey Foundation is assisting us in identifying where in the process of our current case practice we have been unsuccessful in finding relative caregivers. They will be making recommendations across our entire system, which will include both practice and policy changes. In addition, representatives from Alleghany County and the State of Tennessee -- two national leaders in relative care -- will be working with our staff to share how they implemented their major reforms. We also are going to establish internal processes to ensure that we continue to aggressively look for relative resources after a child has entered care.

With the right focus, we can find more relative foster homes. This will have a rippling effect throughout our system and result in fewer children in congregate settings and more children living with families they know. Improved working relationships with families will produce better planning and greater success in meeting the needs of children overall -- two areas where the Department has been most challenged under the Juan F. Exit Plan.

Most important, improving our work with families will lead to better outcomes for children.

We also are making improvements in how we recruit overall and how we support foster homes. Connecticut is one of the few states in the country to use a sophisticated, data-driven "market segmentation" strategy to recruit homes among the general public. While we have not yet seen results from this particular targeting strategy, we now are using mapping technology to further target and refine activities. We will be able to focus recruitment activities on neighborhoods where data indicates we can have the most success finding homes. By spring we expect to be the only state in the nation to use validated assessment tools to identify the safety and needs of children in care, the capacity of foster homes to meet their needs, and the services necessary to develop a support plan to successfully care for the child.

A key reform related to how we treat families is known as Differential Response or DRS. The Department has been laboring for a long time to implement this initiative, and I want to be more aggressive in implementing a Differential Response System in Connecticut. In other jurisdictions that have developed DRS, it has proven to be a more effective way to help families whose involvement with child protection reflects the struggles of chronic poverty. DRS reflects a "how can we help" approach that is aimed at bringing voluntary services to families without the adversarial message that often accompanies what we do. To this end, I am interested in exploring with the Human Services committee legislation that has had success in other jurisdictions in eliminating conditions of poverty as a basis for abuse and neglect petitions.

Again, let me ask the question, "What will be different?"

My second area of focus also is about communication and transparency -- but extended to a wider circle of partners. This larger circle includes families at the center but also consists of many other individuals and organizations: service providers, community organizations, schools, police and medical professionals, the courts, advocates and policy makers, state and local government and others. A spirit of partnership will be a hallmark of my tenure.

I spoke before of the transition team I formed comprised of doctors, therapists, advocates, judges and DCF social workers. I expect to receive a report from the group in approximately 120 days, and one of the important products I will look for is recommendations on how the Department can be more effective in collaborating with the outside agencies that share this work with children and families.

Real-life solutions require a full collaboration with as many resources as we can muster to help families use and build upon their strengths to overcome their challenges. The Department must be an effective member of a team that includes the family at the center and that wraps around the family the community supports that it needs. I also strongly believe that we need our communities to buy in and that the problems that children experience belong to everyone in the community where the children reside. The family has primary responsibility for the child – but that family lives in a community that shares some of the responsibility for that child's and family's well-being. Fulfilling that responsibility is something that will require aggressive outreach.

These partnerships extend to the federal government and other funding sources as well. I am committed to maximizing federal reimbursement for various child welfare and behavioral health services provided by the Department. This includes additional Medicaid and Title IV-E funds for children in our care. I also want to seek partnerships with state and national philanthropic organizations to assist us in fulfilling our mission to improve the lives of the children and families we serve.

What will be different?

A third area where I am committed to doing things differently is in maintaining a bold and clear focus and on establishing a management team where the right people are in the right positions. The Department cannot afford to move from crisis to crisis. We will be focused on key system improvements. Our relationships with families and our other partners must always be at the center of our efforts. This requires that my administration establishes an environment and a culture where the staff feels supported, empowered, and safe to put families first.

This point is important enough to deserve elaboration. Staff must feel supported in working with families as partners. In order to work effectively with families, our staff must feel safe enough to trust in families. Workers must conduct full and thorough assessments throughout their cases. But where the information warrants, they need to feel secure enough to take a legitimate, validated risk with a family struggling to overcome their challenges. Child protection work requires that we manage risks effectively, and staff need management and supervisory support to do that. My administration will be focused on creating that atmosphere and in making sure we have the right management team in place to make that happen.

What will be different?

The Department will be a flatter, less hierarchical, and less centralized organization. We don't need silos within the Department. We need regional organizations that have all the services for children and families under one roof. Central office can be smaller and its talented experts can be put to the service of the regional organizations that serve children and families directly. The two uppermost layers of management in the child welfare bureau can be eliminated, and final decision-making authority will be closer to the communities where our children and families live, and where our social workers do their critical work.

What will be different?

In short, it will be the communication and transparency needed to build relationships and effective partnerships with families and communities. My conversations these last 6 weeks with families, advocates, providers, policy makers, and others has made me even more certain of this direction. Communication, transparency, relationships -- this is my vision for my administration.

I know that I have my work cut out for me. But I am not alone. There is a wealth of talent at DCF. The State of Connecticut has unique resources and talent both within government and in the private sector that we can learn from and partner with. I am confident that together, we can effectuate meaningful change to the way we do business and that the lives of our children and their families can be improved immeasurably. There is no greater challenge and no greater reward.