

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget
February 17, 2012

Testimony of Ursula L. Haerter, President of The Children's Law Center, Inc.

Good evening. My name is Ursula Haerter. I am President of The Children's Law Center (CLC), and I am here to urge you to save the tax dollars of Connecticut citizens by restoring the funding of CLC that was omitted in Governor Malloy's budget proposal.

The Children's Law Center (CLC) is in its 19th year of protecting vulnerable, poor children in the family court process in Connecticut. These children are entangled in the most difficult of high conflict divorce cases, involving parents without means and typically without attorneys, who have significant, chronic issues, such as substance abuse, mental health issues or domestic violence.

Last year, the state's budget provided a line item appropriation administered by the Children's Trust Fund for three (3) years of funding to The Children's Law Center at \$150,000 annually, or approximately 16% of CLC's annual budget. In the current fiscal environment where the state's public servants are required to do more with less, the ability of a small non-profit organization like the CLC to complement the work of the agencies and courts to help save taxpayer dollars is more critical than ever.

CLC's Law Line assists callers by giving information, advice and referrals regarding issues that affect children. Callers who often cannot afford attorneys of their own are educated about the court system by trained staff personnel, directly resulting in increased efficiencies in case processing as parties navigate the court system with greater competence. In addition, the majority of referrals to the Law Line come from the State of Connecticut, namely, DCF, the Courts, Probation, Family Relations, and 211, saving these referral sources from training and maintaining staff to respond to such inquiries.

CLC's mediation program, Families in Transition, is designed to divert high conflict families out of the court system and provide them the opportunity to create parenting plans that are appropriate for their children. With a means based fee schedule, CLC offers the only area mediation service for low income families. Over 80% of our clients are referred by the courts and many are court mandated to attend. By securing agreed resolutions through mediation, CLC helps unclog court dockets.

Our representation program, which is CLC's cornerstone, provides court appointed legal representation for children in family court matters and post-judgment monitoring services. By working with the parents and children to determine what resources can assist the family and what orders would work best to address the lives of our child clients, our attorneys successfully settle 85% of their cases. When court orders issue, CLC attorney recommendations are accepted 99% of the time. In 86% of CLC's closed cases, the parties do not return to court. Perhaps the strongest indication of CLC's success is that the demand from the courts for appointments often exceeds our capacity. In this regard, we have also provided at no cost to the judicial department our services in training attorneys to represent children through the Guardian Ad Litem Academy.

Taxpayers receive a significant return on their investment in CLC through its programs. Please continue to recognize the value of the services provided by The Children's Law Center and restore its funding in the amount of \$150,000.

Thank you.