

Testimony On Including the Commission on Children In A New Commission on Citizen Advocacy As Proposed in the Governor's Budget

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Senator Harp, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Betsy Morgan. I am the Director of the Middlesex Coalition for Children, whose mission is to improve the lives of children in Middletown and Middlesex County.

I am here to testify AGAINST the proposal in the Governor's budget to save money by consolidating the Commission on Children and other legislative commissions in a new Commission on Citizen Advocacy.

I think this is generally a retrograde idea.. Consolidation would weaken voices – Women's, African American, Latino and Puerto Rican, Asian and Pacific American, as well as children's – that urgently need to be louder and more forceful, not the reverse. As even the most hidebound of us are beginning to realize, these are the voices of the future.

My organization works most closely with the Commission on Children. There are a lot of reasons why cutting and subsuming the Commission is a REALLY BAD idea. Here are three:

- The Commission brings more money to the table than it spends. In the last two years, the Commission's budget was just over \$1 million, but it brought in nearly \$1.5 million in federal, philanthropic, private and in-kind assistance to community programs. What kind of saving is it to kill a money-maker?
- The Commission, more than any other state agency, moves the children's agenda forward. Connecticut desperately needs to do better by its children. The Commission has shaped the early childhood agenda, which now seems to be bearing fruit, and the agendas on child poverty and children in the recession – to name only the most obvious.
- The Commission is uniquely skilled at bringing the nation's best research to bear on policy development in Connecticut. Our state suffers from insularity. It is, alas, not always the most progressive or innovative. By bringing in national speakers and organizing informational sessions at the legislature, the Commission has done a great deal to keep our thinking up to date.

The Commission on Children works for the legislature, but its influence is felt throughout the state. Last month my organization invited Elaine Zimmerman to speak on how to respond to the tragedy at Sandy Hook, a horror that has left many of us shaken and demoralized. Elaine spent the weeks after December 14 in the company of Newtown children. "I knew it was where I needed to be," she said. Out of that direct experience, by keeping the focus on the children themselves, on families and on communities, she was able to help us find strength and hope.

I can't emphasize enough the service the Commission performs for those of us in towns and cities around the state who are working to improve the lives of children in our communities. At the level of state government, the Commission on Children has been our most important ally -- by far. No other agency makes such a point of getting to know -- and mentor -- local leaders on children's issues. It has an eagle eye for promising local initiatives which it brings to the attention of legislators and policy makers. It is the Commission to which local leaders turn to smooth the rough edges of their advocacy, and test their ideas against sophisticated policy analysis. If poor children have a growing voice at the Capitol, the Commission deserves much of the credit.

Children can't speak for themselves, and the children who most need help don't have parents who can hire lobbyists. They need organizations like mine and many others. And we need the Commission. We REALLY need it. If the Commission is diminished, so will be much of the best local work on behalf of struggling children and families.

Please resist the Governor's recommendation to consolidate -- and cut -- the Commission on Children and other commissions. Please support an agency that is absolutely central to the urgent work of improving the lives of Connecticut's children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.