

Testimony for State Public Hearing on 2/19/13 Regarding the Commission on Children

I submit this testimony as a concerned parent, voter and taxpaying resident of Bridgeport. I join with other constituents, particularly parent leaders throughout our state to request our state representatives and senators retain the Commission on Children as a distinct legislative entity. The consolidation of the COC with all other commissions would have a devastating impact on the children and families of our state. The Commission on Children has a track record of leading and partnering with legislators and other statewide stakeholders on prevention, bullying, school readiness, health, safety, poverty and other family issues that affect our non-voting but most valuable and vulnerable residents of our state-children. In the last year alone the COC was critical in the development of policy reform designed to yield positive outcomes for children in education, family income, early care, and health. The passing of the Early Reading in Education Reform law, development of a comprehensive Home Visitation Plan and establishment of the Early Care and Education System is a testament to their ability to shape core policy language that moves an agenda that improves the lives of children and families. No other commission is charged with being the authentic voice of children in our state policy discussions. Please do not diminish or silence that voice by merging and reducing the staff of the COC with other commissions who rightfully have other constituent and policy agendas.

In their unique role the COC also hears and responds to the cries of children and families in crisis. When the mass murders occurred at Sandy Hook elementary school the COC responded. They worked in Newtown from the early morning after the shooting until the town had created its infrastructure for support and healing. They collaborated with Save the Children to create a play and art station in John Reed Middle School to allow children and youth of all ages to have downtime in the midst of a crisis of violence and school safety. This play station was a partnership between play, community mental health, family strengthening and disaster management. Over 400 children and their parents have been supported at this play station that still continues today. The COC also used their website as a resource for parents and others to retrieve guides on how to discuss this tragedy with their children. As a Bridgeport parent of a Kindergarten student I used and appreciated these resources in talking with him in a way that he could understand .

This year the COC celebrated 20 years in their family civics work via the Parent Leadership Training Institute. Since 1997, Bridgeport parent and community leaders and organizations such as the Parent Center, RYASAP, BAYC, Bridgeport Public Education Fund and Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition have collaborated with the Commission on Children to offer the Parent Leadership Training Institute. Parents have graduated to become community leaders serving in various capacities including City Commissioners, Community Council officers, Board of Education Members, School District and local Parent Advisory Council officers, Board Chair and members of Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition. Graduates have successfully implemented community projects to prevent teen pregnancy, increase family literacy, promote healthy living and wellness for children and parents, support education via advocacy, after-school programs, and

provision of school supplies, mentor and tutor children, increase community awareness and collaboration of resources, clean up and revitalize a city neighborhood, park and tennis courts. Many of these volunteer projects were done in partnership with city and school officials and other community organizations that care for our children.

As you all must know the rate of child poverty in Bridgeport is more than twice the statewide rate and 50% higher than the national rate. Over 10,000 children in Bridgeport are living in poverty. Bridgeport PLTI seeks to enable parents to become change agents and leading advocates for these children and others. We ask you our legislators to join us as leading child advocates to secure the funding for the Commission on Children who makes Bridgeport PLTI possible.

In considering the amounts of money involved to sustain the commission remember that the COC has raised \$1.32 for community programs for every \$1.00 given to their agency budget. Some of the funds raised include \$30,000 from W.K. Kellogg Foundation for expansion of PLTI as a best practice for parent engagement and family civics, \$440,000 from the Grossman Family Foundation for the development of reading assessment tool, school mentors to train teachers and administrators and parents on to most effectively partner in their children's literacy, and \$49,500 from Hartford Foundation for Public Giving grant to strengthen the linkage between state and local efforts for young children. These funding opportunities would be limited or eliminated if the COC cease to exist as a separate commission.

The proposed consolidation of commissions is too costly a measure in the sincere efforts to balance the budget. The ultimate price is the drastic and long lasting impact on our children who cannot and should not have to incur these expenses. I urge all legislators not to charge the quality of life account of our children once again. Although children are amazingly resilient we as adults still have an obligation and responsibility to ensure their well-being. The Commission on Children is a statewide vehicle to do just that.

Respectfully Submitted by: Donna Thompson-Bennett
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