

42

Appropriations Committee

Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget

DSS - Human Services

February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Good evening Madam Chair(s) and members of the committee:

I am Alison Mundy, Director of Development of the Children's Law Center of Connecticut (CLC). The Children's Law Center provides legal representation and family mediation services to children living in poverty. These are children who, through no fault of their own, become embroiled in high-conflict, protracted divorce, custody and visitation disputes. The cases we represent are complicated and involve allegations of mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration and domestic abuse. Our child clients are at high-risk of abuse or neglect. In more than half of our cases, neither parent has legal representation, leaving the Children's Law Center as the only legal presence in the case. CLC's Legal Representation program now serves eight family court jurisdictions throughout the state. The funding we receive from the state legislature comprises 13% of our operating budget, and is critical to maintaining our programs at current capacities.

CLC serves thousands of children annually through its combined programs. Our Legal Representation program helps parents living at or below the poverty level to reach agreements out of court, saving the state, and the court system, time and money. In 2012, 76% of our cases

ended out of court, in settlement or agreement. In cases that do go before a judge, final orders reflect our attorney's recommendations 99% of the time. Because of the high demand and need for our services, we are sometimes forced to turn down the most compelling cases.

More than 60% of the referrals to our free legal help line come from DCF, 2-1-1 Infoline, court and the Office of the Child Advocate. By providing these callers with information and answers to their questions, they are subsequently better prepared and navigate more efficiently when they do enter the court system.

Our budget figures show it costs CLC an average \$750 per child and \$1,982 per case to represent a child in family court, a bargain by any standard. In 2012, the Children's Law Center provided legal representation to 576 children. It is certain the burden to the state would be substantially greater without our intervention. We have been RBA compliant and have provided timely reports to the state agency which administers our funding.

The **Children's Law Center** is currently under contract with the state for \$150,000 annually, administered by the **DSS** through the **Children's Trust Fund**. The contract was renewed for three years in July, 2011. Governor Malloy's most recent budget proposal eliminates our funding altogether. While the amount may not be significant in the scope of the overall state budget, this funding is critical to our operational budget. Without it we will be forced to retract our services. Our cost of providing legal representation to low-income children in one family court jurisdiction amounts to approximately \$110,000, annually. 53% of our organizational income is derived from fundraising. We provide a critical service to some of Connecticut's

neediest citizens at remarkably little cost to the state. The cost and burden incurred by allowing these children to go un-served would be far more substantial.

We respectfully request funding for the Children's Law Center be restored in full for FY 2013-2014, in honor of our contract with the State of Connecticut.

Thank you.