

February 14, 2013

Dear Members of the Education Committee:

As parents with extensive knowledge of Birth to Three we want to testify concerning House Bill 6359 that proposes to create an Office of Early Childhood. This bill would transfer Birth to Three to this new office in 2014. We want to make sure that the integrity of the Birth to Three Program is kept intact and in fact enhanced in any new agency because this program is a powerful tool during a child's critical developmental window. If this legislation is indeed passed, it is also imperative that the transition period be handled in a very careful way to make sure that critical services and support do not become inaccessible for those who need it the most. We cannot afford one child to fall through the cracks. I implore you to consider having Birth to Three parent representatives, who are a parent of a present or former Birth to Three student, specifically to the Office of Early Childhood Committee. The bill currently states only "(5) two members designated by the Head Start Association, one of whom shall be the parent of a present or former Head Start student." (Lines 167-169, Bill 6359). Birth to Three currently serves over 4,000 children monthly and having a parent representative would help speak for these families and bring a unique perspective of families with disabilities to this committee.

Our son Wyatt was fortunate enough to have recently completed years of services with an incredible Birth-To-Three team. Wyatt began receiving services in 2009. The level of services and the amount of people we worked with increased dramatically in February of 2011 when Wyatt was diagnosed as being on the Autism Spectrum. Soon after, he was also diagnosed with the genetic disorder Fragile X Syndrome.

Our family and our home became hosts to a special group of PTs, Psychologists, STs, OTs, DTs, and BCBA's five days a week all through 2011. It goes without saying that these services ramped up at what was a very painful and difficult time for our family. Wyatt was withdrawing into himself and every day we ached at how much of a struggle his life had become. The one light piercing the darkness was the incredible team of professionals who worked tirelessly with him and with us.

Every single person on our team worked tirelessly to help find a way to help Wyatt process information in order to literally teach him how to learn. The approach always was not to make Wyatt communicate and learn the way we do, but to find out how he was able to communicate and learn and adapt to that. It was clear that these people were not going through the motions, or just doing a job. They loved Wyatt, worked tirelessly with him and supported not just him, but us also. They rejoiced at his milestones, never gave up on him, and gave us hope about the future. Equally important, the Birth to Three Team was as helpful during our dealings with the Ansonia School

System as we prepared for Wyatt to turn 3 years old. Thanks to their tireless efforts we had an incredible transition from Birth to Three to the ACES school in North Haven where Wyatt has been for over a year.

We strongly feel that the work this team did laid a foundation that will make any continued progress by Wyatt possible. Birth to Three literally gave our son a chance at a future and helped save a family. They were here for him and for us in our darkest hours and words cannot fully express what they have meant to our family. We implore you to please keep this one story in mind when considering HB 6359. The children and families involved are not just names or numbers on a ledger. The people impacted are the most precious and fragile citizens of Connecticut. Early Childhood services can be the ultimate lifeline or safety net and the positive effects of an effective program reverberate long after the actual services come to an end.

Lastly, there is a proposed change that will impact current and future members of the State Interagency Birth-to-Three Coordinating Council (starting on line 1386). It states that the Governor shall appoint all members of the council for terms of three years (line 1411-1412). We feel this provision should be amended. In order to preserve the continuity and efficiency that comes from having an experienced Council team, any changes to current members should occur in a controlled and gradual manner. This will allow for the influx of fresh ideas while maintaining the knowledge, flexibility, expertise, and institutional memory of the more seasoned members. It is also vital that any current or future parent member be given the choice to remain an integral part of the team if their child meets the criteria "ages six years and younger" and eventually "twelve years and younger" (lines 1389 – 1395), or they have another child in Birth to Three. These changes in their family dynamic allows for a fresh perspective as a parent.

Please make sure that the needs of our children are always the overriding priority in your decisions. Thank you for your time and consideration!

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