

Testimony Supporting

H.B. 5764: An Act Increasing Temporary Family Assistance Benefits for Grandparents and Other Nonparent Caretaker Relatives

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Aging Committee
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Senator Ayala, Representative Serra, distinguished members of the aging committee:

I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports increasing temporary family assistance benefits for nonparent caretaker relatives, which will help to preserve families and save money by preventing children from unnecessarily entering into foster care.

Involvement in the child welfare system often begins because of factors related to poverty or temporary family emergencies that impede a parent's care for a child. In these cases, when a child does not face imminent danger, a growing body of research suggests that child protective agencies are best able to provide for the health and safety of children by collaborating with and supporting these struggling families so as to keep children out of state custody, rather than opening formal abuse and neglect cases, which can be damaging to family relationships, as well as more costly to the state.¹ In fact, according to a 2012 memo by Department of Children and Families (DCF) Commissioner Joette Katz, the quality of family participation is the single most important factor impacting a child's well-being once DCF is involved.²

For this reason, in March of 2012, DCF launched its new Family Assessment Response (FAR, formerly Differential Response) – an evidenced based and nationally lauded system for diverting low risk child endangerment cases away from foster care and to family members and community organizations that can collaborate with parents and better meet the needs of children.³ However, **unless family members who are ready, willing, and able to assume care of a child in need are very secure economically, the disparity between Connecticut's low Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) payments and more adequate Foster Care Assistance (FCA) payments makes it difficult for DCF to find safe placements for children without instituting formal and costly child abuse and neglect proceedings.**

Consider the fairly typical example of a single mother of two children who becomes involved with DCF because of a poverty-induced problem, such as food insecurity or impending homelessness. A DCF caseworker makes a determination that a formal allegation of neglect is probably unnecessary. However, in order for the children to be safe while the mother gets back on her feet, it would be

¹ See, Casey Family Services, *Connecticut Department of Children and Families Differential Response*. Available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/drs/pdf/cfs_executivereport_drsfinalreprint.pdf.

² See Commissioner Joette Katz's Memo to mandated reporters, "Transforming the response to reports of abuse and neglect," February, 2012. Available at

http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/mandatedreporter/pdf/drs_update_february_2012_mandated_reporters__3_.pdf.

³ *Ibid.*

best for a relative to assume custody and legal guardianship of the children. This solution, encouraged by FAR, preserves important family ties for children, and avoids unnecessary entry into the foster care system.

Suppose DCF tries to help a grandmother assume legal guardianship of the children. If the grandmother lives in DSS Region B, after assuming custody, she will receive only \$470 in cash assistance each month.⁴ At this low rate, it is unlikely that the grandmother will be able to support the two children.

Without a financially secure family placement available, DCF will probably be forced to make a filing of neglect. A court case will be opened, a lawyer appointed, and, if the children are found to be neglected, DCF is granted legal custody of the children and they will be placed in foster care. The mother and children will become unnecessarily involved with the court system. Only then can DCF place the child with *the same grandmother* who, because she is now considered a “foster parent,” will receive a monthly payment of \$1,543.80.⁵ **Thus, under the current payment structure, there is a perverse incentive for DCF to open expensive and unnecessary cases.**

Under the proposed statutory change, the grandmother’s temporary assistance payment would be 75% of the prevailing foster care rate, which is $0.75 * \$1,543.80$ or \$1,157.85/month.⁶ This increased TFA rate dramatically increases the likelihood that the grandmother will be able to safely assume custody of the two children without any court involvement.

Therefore, under the proposed statutory change, each time DCF guides a child into the custody of a relative through FAR, rather than open an abuse or neglect case, Connecticut pays at least 25% less than it would under the current foster care system. This minimum savings estimate excludes all the added cost savings associated with not paying for social workers, judges, and lawyers. This estimate also does not account for the myriad of intangible benefits to child and family health and safety that come from avoiding an unnecessary allegation of neglect, and the benefits to children of being able to live with relatives they know and love at a time of great family stress

In short, H.B. 5764 will allow Connecticut to better support its most needy children and families at times of greatest family stress at a reduced cost to the state.

⁴ This is the temporary family assistance rate for a family of three in Region B. See, *OLR Backgrounder: Welfare to Work – Eligibility, Benefits, Caseload, and Work Requirement*, September, 2012. Available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2012/rpt/2012-R-0384.htm>.

⁵ The 30 day per-child foster care rate for children under 5 is \$771.90. This is the lowest possible rate for two children, because older children and children with special needs receive a higher rate. See DCF Policy Manual 36-55-25.2. These payments are much closer to what is necessary to support children than TFA, because they are 100% of the USDA “Expenditures on children by families,” see DCF Policy Manual 36-55-25.1. For about 50% of DCF’s foster care cases, Connecticut receives reimbursement from the federal government for 50% of the foster care board and care costs under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act.

⁶ Note that, for each additional child removed, the gap between the current TFA payment and the proposed new one grows, because TFA payments increase by only around \$100 for each child, whereas FCA is a per child rate. For example, if three children instead of two are placed with a relative, TFA currently pays \$576; under the proposed statutory change, it would pay $3 * \$771.90 * 0.75$ or \$1736.67.