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MARCH 12, 2014

IN SUPPORT OF RAISED SB 424 AN ACT CONCERNING ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN IN THE CARE AND CUSTODY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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For the last 30 years, the attorneys in the Children at Risk Unit at Connecticut Legal Services (CLS) have represented low-income families and children. This testimony is being submitted by the members of the Child and Youth Advocacy Team (CYAT) in the Children at Risk Unit at CLS, who represent children who have been the victims of abuse and neglect. Our young clients in out-of-home placements are vulnerable in many ways. In our experience, having the consistency of a pre-school setting is helpful for their emotional growth as well as their behavioral and academic growth. In addition, studies show that preschool is fundamental for the healthy development of at risk children, particularly those who have experienced abuse and neglect:

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY STUDY: A 2013 study by Oregon State University researchers found that Head Start makes a positive impact in the lives of some of its highest risk children, both academically and behaviorally. The study, "School readiness in children living in non-parental care: Impacts of Head Start," published in the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, Vol 34, pgs 28-37, sheds light on how Head Start helps children living in non-parental care (Summary at Oregon State University online publication, Synergies, <http://health.oregonstate.edu/synergies/2013/academic-gains-found-among-high-risk-kids-in-head-start/>). It has been shown that children in non-parental care show more problems with academics, behavior, and a wide variety of risk factors. The Oregon researchers wanted to know if Head Start, designed as a wrap-around program which links child, teacher, and parent, works for children who do not have a traditional family. Analyzing the data on 253 children in non-parental care, the Oregon researchers found that Head Start had positive impacts on school readiness, particularly in regards to early



academic skills, positive teacher-child relationships, and a reduction in behavior problems (<http://health.oregonstate.edu/synergies/2013/academic-gains-found-among-high-risk-kids-in-head-start/>).

CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS: In making the case for early childhood intervention, Casey Family Programs' Research Brief, released in October 2013, notes that positive child development occurs in the context of nurturing relationships. "Both the child's experience of maltreatment and changes in the primary caregiver are serious disruptions to healthy development. Such disruptions can alter the physical development of the brain and have serious negative consequences on children's cognitive, emotional and social development." (Making the Case for Early Childhood Intervention in Child Welfare, pg. 7, <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/pdf/EarlyChildhoodIntervention.pdf>). Therefore, effective child welfare-focused interventions targeted specifically to the needs of families with young children are essential for safe reduction of the foster care population and for preventing ongoing involvement of child welfare in families' lives (Pg. 3).

U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES'CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY: In its publication on Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth, it is noted that "a growing body of evidence documents that functioning is affected when a child experiences trauma and the cognitive, physical emotional social health and developmental problems can result (Pg. 2, August 2011, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/braindevtrauma.cfm>). Factors which may increase a child's risk for developmental delays include: child maltreatment, particularly before age 3, parental substance abuse or mental health problems, family poverty or domestic violence, and involvement with a child welfare system (Pg. 3, citing Barth et al, 2007, Admin for Children and Families, 2007).

Most scientists agree healthy brain development requires positive relationships, rich learning opportunities and safe environments (Pg. 12, citing Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Head Start programs are early child care and education programs. Early care and education programs which offer rich learning environments and work to strengthen families can reduce the effects of an unfavorable home environment (Pg. 17, citing Stepleton, McIntosh & Corrington, 2010).

The physical and emotional distress which traumatized children experience may lead to both behavioral problems in school and poor academic performance. Also, potential developmental delays may worsen the situation as children fall behind their peers academically and have difficulty making social connections (Pg. 18). Head Start staff members, who are trained to know the stages of development and the warning signs for developmental delays, can work with

the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to identify concerns and connect these children to needed services.

For all of these reasons, Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. advocates for the provision of preschool for all of our young clients in DCF care. Generally, DCF is in agreement with such services and Head Start enrollment takes place without a problem. Occasionally, it can take weeks or months before we can get a preschool program in place. Having the requirements of Raised SB 424 in place will greatly assist in getting these young children into pre-school programs promptly. During the early years of development, every week is critical. All at-risk children, but particularly those who have experienced the trauma of being removed from their primary caregiver, should be afforded the opportunity to attend preschool to help counter the negative developmental consequences of their trauma. It is not only the right thing to do, but also, cost-benefit analyses have shown there is a stronger return on investments from strengthening families, supporting development and preventing maltreatment than there is from funding treatment programs later in life (Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth, pg.2, citing Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007).