STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
999 ASYLUM AVENUE, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06105

Sarah Healy Eagan
Acting Child Advocate

Testimony of Sarah Eagan, Acting Child Advocate
In Support of A Raised Bill Regarding Access to Quality Pre-Kindergarten for Children in the Care of the Department of Children and Families

March 11, 2014

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleishman, Senator Bye, Representative McCrory and distinguished members of the Education Committee: I appreciate the opportunity to offer this testimony today **in support of Preschool for Children in DCF Care.**

The mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) includes evaluating the delivery of state funded services to children and advocating for policies and practices that promote their well-being and protect their special rights.

According to DCF, over 50 % of preschool-age children in the care and custody of DCF are not documented as being enrolled in preschool.[1] DCF currently serves approximately 400 abused and neglected preschool-age children who have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care.

We must ensure that our most vulnerable young children, 3 to 5 year olds who have been abused or neglected by their caregiver, are afforded every opportunity to learn and grow. Research confirms that preschool attendance is the most important factor for kindergarten readiness. This is especially true for at-risk, high need children.

Young children in DCF care are much more likely than typical peers to have developmental delays and impairments by age 3. Research supported by the Department of Health and Human Services demonstrates that 40% of 3 year old toddlers that even touch a child welfare investigation, even if they do not go into foster care, present with a developmental delay or impairment that could qualify them for Birth-to-Three services.[2] (Further underscoring the critical need to ensure developmental screening and prompt referral for quality early intervention for infants and toddlers who have suffered abuse or neglect.)

---

[1] See October 29, 2013 email from DCF to Alexandra Dufresne, attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy.
[2] National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, 2012 (Wave II), found on the web at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nscaw_wave_ii_permanency_report_one_page_overview.pdf

Providing quality preschool to abused and neglected children will promote healthy social-emotional, cognitive and physical development. Children who attend high quality preschool are more likely to be academically and socially prepared for kindergarten, have lower retention rates, and are less likely to need special education services. Research also confirms that preschool attendance for high need children increases high school graduation rates. Currently, of children who exit DCF foster care after age 18, only 65% leave with a high school diploma.[3]
The federal government is focused on increasing early intervention and education opportunities for high-need young children. The most recent *Race to the Top* opportunity was all about assisting states with ensuring quality early childhood education opportunities for under-served and high-need children. *Race to the Top* criteria outlined that "high-need" children included children who were being served by the state child welfare system.

Federal child welfare law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act, requires that states ensure the medical and educational needs of children in foster care are met. Based on what we know now about the imperative of quality early childhood education, particularly for high need children, it is essential that we provide such opportunities for abused and neglected preschool age children in DCF care.

The State acts as the parent for these children in foster care. The most important question we can ask about how we serve abused and neglected children is this:

> **Are these children better off because of the support and protection the state provided?**

Connecticut can and should maximize Head Start and public school slots for DCF-committed children. Last year, of the roughly 9,000 Head Start slots statewide, only 168 went to children in DCF foster care.[4] This is true despite the fact that children who have been abused or neglected are given priority for Head Start placement. It should be noted, that another 400 families in Head Start last year were receiving some type of child welfare support or supervision.

This data reveals that approximately 250 abused and neglected preschool-age children were not documented as being enrolled in school this past year. This is a surmountable challenge with existing community preschool slots. We must ensure that DCF has the resources and data reporting capacity to confirm enrollment of all preschool age children in quality early childhood education.

The Governor and this Legislature have been champions of early childhood education. Our law and policy makers have rightfully set out on a mission to provide universal preschool in Connecticut, an essential step to ensuring the well-being of all our children and closing the Achievement Gap. A critical component of this mission will be to ensure that the roughly 400 young children in DCF care have access to quality early childhood education.

---

[3] See PRI report, Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging out of Care, pg. 42 http://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2013/DCF%20Age%20Out%20Staff%20F&R%20Report.pdf
[4] See October 2, 2013 email from Grace Whitney, Director, Connecticut Head Start State Collaboration Office, to Alexandra Dufresne, Attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy. See also Note 1, supra.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sarah Eagan, J.D.
Acting Child Advocate