STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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Sarah Healy Eagan
Acting Child Advocate

Testimony of Sarah Healy Eagan, Acting Child Advocate before the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
March 4, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Looney, Representative Janowski, Senator Fasano, Representative Camillo and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. It is an honor and privilege to be nominated to serve as the state's Child Advocate by Governor Dannel Malloy. I thank the Committee for this opportunity to introduce myself and discuss my vision for the Office of the Child Advocate.

I grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York, and I moved to Hartford in 1993 to attend Trinity College. I worked throughout my time in college and I continued to live in the Hartford area in the years that followed. I attended University of Connecticut School of Law, graduating with honors in 2004. I am married to Matt Eagan, a former sportswriter for the Hartford Courant (and now law student), and we live in West Hartford with our two young and extremely active children!

Most of my legal career thus far has been spent advocating for vulnerable, at-risk, abused or neglected children and youth. During my years with the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit law firm affiliated with the University Of Connecticut School Of Law, I provided legal representation to children of all ages who were victims of abuse or neglect and who were involved with the Department of Children and Families. I represented these children in juvenile court proceedings, and I provided additional advocacy for educational services and health care supports. In 2009, I was certified as a Child Welfare Law Specialist by the National Association of Counsel for Children. I also developed and provided multidisciplinary training and technical assistance to juvenile court lawyers. Finally, I advocated for policy and practice reform that could improve outcomes for children.

Throughout the years I learned the value of **collaboration, preparation and independence** as key elements for problem solving on behalf of children and their families. I keenly understand the imperative of thoughtful and collegial advocacy, the necessity of respectfully stating the unpopular opinion, and the need to acknowledge the hard work and vision of all stakeholders.

As one example, I advocated for several years to reduce the number of very young abused or neglected children placed in group homes. Research has consistently supported the

developmental necessity of placing young children, particularly infants and toddlers, into homes where their needs can be met by a consistent caregiver. I facilitated training for child protection lawyers on the developmental needs and legal rights of young children in foster care; I worked with colleagues to engage lawmakers and state agency representatives at DCF. I researched practices and policies throughout the country to help make the case that young children can and should be placed into family settings whenever possible.

Throughout discussions about young children in group care there were challenging issues and views that had to be aired and resolved. Do very young children with complex needs benefit from group care? How quickly could the state transition children to families? Were there enough foster homes, and what about sibling groups? The issues were important and not all navigated summarily. Yet the principle remained and needed to be stated, that all young children should be in families whenever possible.

In 2009, there were over 200 children age zero to five that moved in and out of group homes. Now, in 2014, DCF has ensured virtually all young children in out-of-home care live in family settings. This critical shift away from group care for very young children took place as a result of independent yet collaborative advocacy, and a collective willingness to problem solve regarding this challenging issue.

As an advocate for children, I have served on numerous boards and working groups, addressing issues ranging from child welfare policies, educational reform, and practice standards for juvenile court lawyers. I assisted with the development of legislation on behalf of children, including educational stability law for children in foster care (P.A. 10-160), "Raise the Grade" legislation for child welfare and juvenile justice youth (P.A. 13-234, Sec. 124), and legislation to increase access to kinship foster care (P.A. 11-116). I served for many years as the co-chair of a DCF advisory committee, serving alongside social workers, agency leaders, foster parents and other community members, all of whom were engaged in a positive and thoughtful effort to improve outcomes for our children and families.

My work has prepared me well for the role of the state Child Advocate, an office that fields varying and frequent inquiries and pleas to help children with access to services, education, benefits and child welfare supports. My experience with policy reform and my individual advocacy on behalf of children has given me important knowledge to identify systemic challenges and help the many individuals that call this office.

Ultimately, the work of the Child Advocate is to review how well systems actually serve children. This work is accomplished through our leadership on the State Child Fatality Review Panel, our participation in more than twenty taskforces and working groups throughout the state, our relationships with colleagues and state leaders across systems, and our unique access to child-specific information that allows us to investigate and viscerally understand how vulnerable children's needs are fulfilled or remain unmet.

During my short tenure as Acting Child Advocate, we have concentrated our work on the following:

1. Improved tracking of individual complaints and calls for help from families and caregivers, ensuring appropriate advice and referral as well as data collection regarding the nature of calls and the issues raised.
2. The development of public health alerts regarding child fatality trends and prevention recommendations.
3. Examination of various agencies' infrastructure and capacity for quality assurance and reporting regarding children's needs and outcomes achieved.
4. Prioritization of issues affecting children with special developmental or health care needs, including ensuring access to appropriate mental health services, assessing the quality of facility-based care, and reducing unnecessary restraint and seclusion of children in schools.

I have had the privilege to rely on numerous consultants in the last six months who have donated their time to this Office to help us accomplish our work in the most comprehensive and expert fashion.

Over the next several months, the Office anticipates working on children's mental health reform, reduction of restraint and seclusion, improved educational outcomes for children in foster care, and stronger transparency and accountability for child serving systems. The Office anticipates releasing at least three public health reports regarding child fatality review dealing with Sudden Unexplained Infant Death, early pediatric homicide, and fatalities of children birth to five in the state of Connecticut during 2013. These reports will contain multidisciplinary recommendations for child fatality prevention.

The Office of the Child Advocate plays a vital and public role in ensuring transparency, accountability of the state-funded systems that serve vulnerable children. My work on behalf of my clients has shown me the necessity of both independence and humility in pursuing this critical and complex work. I will endeavor to bring that humility and my commitment to children's issues to the Office of the Child Advocate.

Sincerely,

Sarah Healy Eagan