

Testimony Supporting

H.B. 6393: An Act Increasing State Support to Grandparents who are Raising Children

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Aging Committee

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Senator Flexer, 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 H.B. 6393 which, by increasing Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) benefits for nonparent caretaker relatives, 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 such as extreme poverty, parental illness, or a temporary family emergency that impedes a parent's care for a child. In these cases, when a child does not face imminent danger, child welfare agencies often turn to children's family or kin (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles, or family friends) to assume temporary custody of a child until parental crisis has been averted. These natural nonparent caretakers are often the most willing to suddenly take on the responsibilities of parenting, and these placements can be less disruptive for children than being placed in a strange home with a foster parent or in a group home. Furthermore, if these family or kin are willing to assume guardianship of the child, this can avert the need for a formal allegation of neglect and a foster care placement; filing such formal allegations can damage a parent's trust of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and can hinder the agency's future efforts to address the crisis at home and reunify parent and child.¹

However, without State support, the unexpected new costs of supporting a child may impose an insurmountable financial burden on otherwise ready, willing, and able families. Temporary State financial assistance is an important part of avoiding this financial barrier to a family placement. **Unfortunately, the disparity between low Connecticut's Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) payments and more appropriate Foster Care Assistance (FCA) payments creates a financial obstacle to DCF finding safe placements for children without instituting formal and costly child abuse and neglect proceedings.**

Consider the example of a single mother of two children who becomes involved with DCF because of a serious but preventable or treatable problem, such as impending homelessness or substance abuse. 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 best for a relative to assume custody and legal guardianship of the children. This solution

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. 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.

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 Department of Social Services (DSS) Region B, after assuming custody, she will receive only a meager \$588 in assistance each month to aid her in supporting the child.² At this low rate, which is less than half the cost of raising a child in Connecticut,³ 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 at least \$1,611.38.⁴ **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 percent of the prevailing foster care rate, which is \$1,208.54/month.⁵ 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. 6393 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.

² This is the (TFA) rate for a family of three in Region B. See the most recent publicly available TFA rate schedule, for October 1, 2011 - September 30, 2014. From “State of Connecticut Temporary Assistance for Needy Families State Plan,” available through the Department of Social Services’ (DSS) website at <http://www.ct.gov/dss/lib/dss/pdfs/tanf/tanfplan033114.pdf>.

³ See footnote 4.

⁴ The 30 day per-child foster care rate for children under 5 is \$805.69. 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.

⁵ 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.