STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Connecticut Office of
Early Childhood

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Governor
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Lt. Governor

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Commissioner

Testimony of Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D., Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
Thursday, February 5, 2015

Good afternoon Senator Duff, Representative Janowski, Senator Kane, Representative Buck-Taylor and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. I am Dr. Myra Jones-Taylor, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood. I am honored to have been nominated by Governor Dannel Malloy to serve as Commissioner and it has been an honor working with the General Assembly to ensure that our youngest children are healthy, ready for school and prepared for lifelong success. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee to discuss my qualifications and my vision for the Office of Early Childhood.

I am a cultural anthropologist with expertise in early care and education policy. I received a doctorate in American studies and anthropology from Yale University, where I also received two master's degrees: one in African American studies and one in American studies.

Prior to joining state government, I served as an assistant professor-faculty fellow at the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at the Silver School of Social Work at New York University. My research focused on the effects of early care and education reform on child care providers in low-income urban communities and the children and families who are intended to benefit from those reforms.

I was an Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy Fellow and a recipient of the Ford Foundation Pre-doctoral Fellowship. I am a former member of the New Haven Board of Education, former New Haven Early Childhood Council member, and former Honorary Faculty Research Fellow at the Humanities Initiative at New York University.

I want to give some background as to how I became Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood. In 2011, the legislature passed P.A. 11-181, which called for a plan to create a coordinated early childhood system in Connecticut. In response to the legislation, Governor Malloy appointed me as the Early Childhood Planning Director in May of 2012. My charge was to research early childhood system models across the country, and propose a plan to the Governor that best suits Connecticut.

What I found is that Connecticut has made significant investments in early childhood programs and has created several nationally recognized programs. But until now, the state has not been able to

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create comprehensive early childhood system. We need to ensure that all children reach their utmost potential, by providing young children and their families with a coordinated system of early childhood services. There was no central agency held accountable for improved outcomes for young children in the state. Consequently, Connecticut lacked a unified vision for early childhood policy and service delivery.

After an eight-month intensive planning process that engaged numerous key stakeholders and national experts, the Governor proposed the creation of an Office of Early Childhood. In June of 2013, the Governor created the Office of Early Childhood by Executive Order #37. The Governor appointed me as Executive Director to lead the new Office in its fledgling year. The Office of Early Childhood was put into statute with passage of P.A. 14-39 this past legislative session, at which point, the Governor appointed me as Commissioner.

With the Office now codified, the following services fall under my authority:

- School Readiness, Child Day Care, state-funded Head Start, Even Start, Head Start Collaboration Office (formerly in the State Department of Education)
- Care 4 Kids, Child Care and Development Fund (formerly in the Department of Social Services)
- The Children's Trust Fund (formerly in the Department of Social Services)
- Charts-a-Course (formerly in the Board of Regents)
- Child Day Care and Youth Camp Licensing (formerly in the Department of Public Health)
- Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (formerly in the Department of Public Health)

Though new, the Office of Early Childhood has hit the ground running. We have brought programs that operated in silos under one early childhood umbrella. Staff are sharing ideas and identifying opportunities to work together across programs. On a weekly basis, my Leadership Team meets to identify strategies to build collaboration and move the agency's priorities forward. I would like to highlight a few of our signature achievements over the last 18 months.

Early Care and Education

- Connecticut succeeded in securing a $47.5 million, four-year federal Preschool Development Expansion Grant. Connecticut's application for the grant aligns with the state's strong existing preschool infrastructure to expand access to high-quality state-funded preschool programs for 428 children and to improve the quality of state-funded preschool programs for another 284 children, for a total of 712 four-year-olds who are at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line in 14 high-need communities. The hallmark of this grant is the provision of comprehensive services similar to Head Start services, high-quality professional development, and teacher compensation mirroring that of public school teachers.

- The Smart Start preschool initiative, passed into law in the 2014 legislation session, will be operational in the fall of 2015. Legislation designates $100 million over 10 years in bonding for capital improvements and $100 million over 10 years from Tobacco Settlement funds for operational costs to create preschool classrooms in public schools for eligible three- and four-year-olds. An RFP was developed and posted in November with a bidder's conference packing two forums in Hartford and Middletown with prospective applicants. Proposals were received and are currently under review. Smart Start grantees will soon be notified and we will work with them through implementation. An RFP will be re-issued in the fall for a new round of grantees.

- An additional 1,020 School Readiness preschool spaces are now available to eligible three- and four-year old children in 46 communities. In determining the allocation, first priority for spaces went to programs that demonstrated high-quality. I am deeply appreciative of the legislature's support to expand preschool to children who otherwise would not have access to high-quality early care and education.

- The OEC helped facilitate the transition of two Head Start programs which lost federal funding to new Head Start programs. With the Divisions of Licensing and Early Care and Education under one coordinated agency, the staff were able to work together to quickly license the new child care programs so they could quickly serve families. The OEC was able to make the transition as seamless as possible, resulting in minimal impact on affected children and their families.

- The OEC-funded 2-1-1 provided 40 training sessions serving 300 participants throughout the state on topics including health and safety, child development and child care licensing requirements, process and benefits. Health and safety kits were provided.

Care4Kids Child Care Subsidy Program

- Over the past year, a significant number of changes have been implemented to improve the delivery of our Care4Kids child care subsidy program. Changes include streamlined and simplified application materials, decreased reliance on snail mail, increased use of phone and email verification, better use of technology, a more user-friendly and informative website, and policy changes to ensure continuity of care.

Accreditation

- Connecticut ranks third in the country for the number of programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and first in the nation per capita. This year the OEC's Accreditation Facilitation Project (AFP) assisted 41 programs achieving NAEYC accreditation and provided support to 140 licensed child care programs seeking accreditation. In collaboration with SDE/IDEA 619, AFP supported public school and community-based programs serving three-, four- and five-year-olds with identified disabilities.

Quality, Standards and Assessment

- In 2014, the OEC dedicated significant staff resources to ensure a Quality Improvement System (QIS) would be ready to launch. We are ready to put a QIS, including a new background check system, into operation, once funding is made available. The OEC has an operational design for its QIS, adopted set of QIS program standards, a chosen methodology for program improvement, and a staffing plan.

- The OEC developed and distributed copies of Connecticut's Early Learning and Development Standards (CT ELDS). The CT ELDS set forth what children, from birth to age five, should know and be able to do across domains of development and areas of learning. They are designed to provide a foundation and common language to help families, communities and school work together to support children's early learning and growth. In addition to the full document, the OEC published family guides with more general information for families and caregivers about supporting children across domains and the importance of screening and posters which include information from the CT ELDS. The OEC has distributed approximately 25,000 CT ELDS

books, 17,000 posters and 83,000 family guides to early childhood programs, providers, libraries and pediatrician's offices.

- Connecticut now has a Core Knowledge and Competency Framework for the role of the teachers across all types of early childhood settings. This Framework will inform the planning for future pre-service and in-service professional development.

- The OEC is participating in a seven-state consortium to develop a Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), which will be aligned with the Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards. This new KEA will be a significant improvement over Connecticut's existing Kindergarten Entry Inventory due the multiple means of administration, use of technology and targeted professional development. This tool will provide information on each child's learning and development across the essential domains of school readiness (social foundations, language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, fine art and physical development). The information provided through the KEA will lead to better instruction and more informed decision-making, resulting in more effective strategies to close the achievement gap.

Workforce Scholarship Assistance

- The OEC made significant improvements to the Early Childhood Professional Registry (www.ccacregistry.org) including the ability to now accept scholarship applications throughout the year. During the 2014 fiscal year, over $900,000 was awarded for scholarship assistance mainly toward Early Childhood degree and credential advancement. We have implemented new policies that provide a more strategic plan to ensure state funding is supporting teachers who are on a successful pathway toward a degree in Early Childhood.

Data System Building

The OEC launched its work on the Early Childhood Information System (ECIS). Currently, Connecticut does not have a centralized mechanism for collecting and managing early childhood data. Early childhood data is dispersed across at least six agencies and more than 25 associated databases, making data sharing incredibly challenging. Without an ECIS, the state cannot make informed and effective early childhood policy, costing the state unnecessarily and hindering its ability to turn the curve in the lives of young children and their families. The ECIS will help ensure that complete and accurate data is collected, linked to and coordinated with the K-12 data system, in particular, so that quality assessments and longitudinal analyses of early care and education programs can be performed and student progress can be monitored. Child and family privacy is a top priority for the Office of Early Childhood. Information in the ECIS is subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. Section 1232g (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accounting Act (HIPAA). Any sharing of information or reporting with other agencies will only be aggregate, de-identified information.

By this spring, it will now be possible to assign one State Assigned Student Identifier (SASID) to a preschool-age child that will remain with that child through Grade 12. That alone is a remarkable achievement, which is one step toward making sound, informed decisions using data.

Licensing

- Annual inspections of licensed child care centers, group child care homes and family child care homes are now required, due to legislation passed in 2014. The annual inspections were made possible by the legislature approving funding for 14 additional licensing specialists. The move to

annual inspections from inspections every two to three years will allow the Licensing Division to better ensure the health and safety of young children.

- The OEC established and implemented a standard training program for newly hired Child Care Licensing Specialists and License and Applications Analysts. We now have consistent written policies and procedures to support licensing specialists in their work with center-based and home-based programs and youth camps.

Development Screening

- The United Way of Connecticut, in partnership with the OEC, was awarded a three-year planning grant from the federal Health Resource and Services Administration (HRSA) to build Connecticut's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS). The ECCS plan, which is well underway, intends to coordinate and expand developmental screening activities in early care and education settings across the state by working with pediatric and other child health providers to link early screening training and referrals among medical homes, early intervention services, child care programs and families.

Family Support Services

- The OEC launched a new website for the Positive Parenting Program, known as Triple P. In addition, over 140 individuals working in Hartford and five towns in Northeastern Connecticut were trained and accredited in Triple P. Support is provided to new Triple P practitioners, and includes one-on-one coaching, telephone support and refresher workshops. A public awareness campaign was launched in May 2014 and included community kickoff events, radio ads and the development of a website, brochures, posters and billboards.

- In the spring of 2014, OEC launched its *Help Me Grow* campaign to increase awareness of the critical need for universal developmental screening of children birth to five years of age and linking at-risk children to necessary supports and services. Participating communities hosted Community Cafés where parents were able to participate in guided, meaningful conversations about child development. These communities held events with free developmental screenings and parents were able to register to receive parent questionnaires through the mail to help track their children's development. More than 1,500 people participated in the campaign as partners, volunteers or parents.

Facilities Improvements

- Over $8 million in bond funds were granted for facility improvements and minor capital repairs for Fiscal Year 2014, with an additional $7.5 million projected for the current fiscal year. These funds help address building and site deficiencies, and promote the health, safety and learning of children in appropriate environments.

I am proud of the headway the OEC has made since June of 2013. There is still much more work ahead to truly build a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system. On a daily basis, I remind myself, this work is not about the system itself, but about what a system can do to improve

the life trajectory for our young children and their families. I pledge to work to my fullest capacity to improve the quality of services for our most vulnerable children. I am here today, not only to ask for your support for my confirmation, but also to ask for you and other members of the General Assembly to work collaboratively with me and my staff at the OEC to invest in and support our young children and their future. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I would be happy to take any questions.