

Kathy Socha
22 Anthony Rd
Bolton, CT 06043

Feb. 17, 2015

TESTIMONY OF Kathy Socha
IN SUPPORT OF SB 842, AN ACT CONCERNING FOSTER CHILDREN AND THE
DESIGNATION OF SURROGATE PARENTS AND HB 5658, AN ACT CONCERNING
EDUCATIONAL SURROGATES, THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND
CHILDREN REQUIRING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Committee on Children
February 17, 2015

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Children:

I submit this testimony **in support of SB 842 and HB 5658.**

My name is Kathy Socha. I have been working as a Surrogate Parent with the Connecticut State Department of Education for the past 4 1/2 years . During this time, I have represented close to 100 children in the educational system, with the majority being adolescents and teens. In each case I have worked closely along with available foster and biological parents with great respect to support them and their student.

We work with children ages 3-18 (and sometimes represent them through age 21). While the work I have done with younger children has been rewarding and has the advantage of an early intervention, I have found my work with adolescents and teens to be equally so.

In the case of younger children, I have most often initially pursued appropriate evaluations, often independent educational evaluations to determine what services are needed. For example, in the case of an eight year old boy I represented last year, when I first met him he was seated at his desk in the center of the school's "special classroom ", which I was told is reserved for children with behavioral issues. He was given workbook pages to complete throughout the day. At no time during the day did he join the general school population. The reason he was placed in this "program" staff reported is that notes from a previous school placement -- one prior to his placement with DCF. indicated a history of behavioral issues and incidents of discipline. He was not exhibiting behavioral problems at this

new school and in fact was barely communicating with anyone there. Through persistence, I was able to obtain the appropriate independent evaluations which clearly outlined this student's need for specialized programming to address his history of trauma. He was provided with an intensive program during the summer months, as an extended school year I was able to secure for him. When he returned to the school, he was able to enter a regular classroom with trauma informed programming, and he did very well. It was a most rewarding site to observe this bright young boy learning and interacting with peers, in sharp contrast to the situation the prior school year. For many young students I have convinced schools to provide intensive reading programs to address the deficits we seen in many of the young children we represent, often due to gaps in instruction. One such intensive program held during extended school years at the Ben Bronze Academy allowed for continued instruction during the following school year, and made a significant difference in reading skill level hence in overall academic performance and self esteem for these students. In other cases I have pursued out of district placements when it has been determined that a therapeutic or otherwise specialized setting is needed. Conversely, many times I have made and won requests for keeping students in a "school of origin" where they may be established and doing well vs. forcing them to change their educational placement due to a change in another factor such as residence or change in nexus (responsible school system).

The work I've done with adolescents and teens, though challenging, has been incredibly rewarding to me personally. I've worked with students in foster or group home placements, as well as a good number who have entered the Juvenile Justice system while in DCF care. I have found that each and every student I've worked with has the wish to be successful in their program. It is the process of nurturing their hope for success, and working with other parties as a unified team that I have found I can make the most difference for them. As surrogate parents, often we are literally the only person who follows these students from one placement to another, through numerous changes in residence and educational placements. This gives us a precious chance to develop a trusting relationship with them in which we can teach invaluable self advocacy and other life skills which they can take with them as they transition to post secondary educational or vocational programs and the adult world.

In one case, for example, a bright 16 year old boy I worked with moved multiple times, and was in and out of detention. Each time I visited him, he would ask about the number of credits he had earned. I constantly assured him that I would guarantee that every bit of work he did in every setting would be acknowledged and he would be given credit for it. He became an active participant in academics, and in the PPT process. He took the SAT, college prep. testing and scored very well. During the time I worked with him, he earned his high school diploma, and became able to see real possibilities for post secondary options to pursue his stated goal of earning a degree in engineering.

In the case of another student I am currently working with, I followed this 16 year old female student from several therapeutic settings to a regular high school in the town she resides in with her foster parents. With the provision of an additional year, as per my request, and our continued support, she was able to do very well and is on course to

graduate this spring. Her plan is to attend Community College and then a four year college to earn a degree in social work and psychology, and we are confident she will achieve this goal.

It is my hope that these bills which would include extending the right to having a surrogate parent to all youth in the juvenile justice system, while maintaining the rights of parents be passed without delay. I believe each of these youth is deserving of all of our efforts to support them. The benefits we can offer, as we serve tirelessly as consistent, dedicated educational advocates to this population are invaluable.

Kathleen R. Socha
Surrogate Parent