Connecticut
Early Childhood
Alliance

Testimony of Merrill Gay
Executive Director, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance
Before the Committee on Children
February 24, 2015

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Merrill Gay, I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, a statewide membership organization committed to ensuring that all children in Connecticut are healthy, safe and ready for lifelong success.

I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 841, An act concerning the implementation of a comprehensive children's mental, emotional and behavioral health plan, Senate Bill 843, An act concerning trauma-informed practice training for teachers, administrators and pupil personnel, and Senate Bill 925, An act establishing a home visitation program consortium.

Regarding all three of these proposals, I recommend the research of the Child Health & Development Institute, which I have referenced in my testimony. CHDI's policy papers and issue briefs on these topics are easily accessed on their website.

As I testified before you last week, it is extremely important that Connecticut improve our system of mental, emotional and behavioral health screening and treatment for young children. For children ages birth through five there is a real shortage of services. The treatment programs that currently exist that focus on early childhood mental health operate at capacity, often with long waiting lists. They need to be available to all children in our state.

Many children have mental health needs early but go undiagnosed and untreated for years. According to CHDI only about 30% of children's delays are detected before kindergarten.[1] At age 5, a more defined system of screening and services is available through the public schools.

From the perspective of child outcomes, the earlier mental health issues are identified and treated, the better. Additionally, from a financial perspective, earlier is also better. Intervening before kindergarten saves between $30,000 and $100,000 per child in academic and social costs.[2]

<u>The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance supports Senate Bill 841, An act concerning the implementation of a comprehensive children's mental, emotional and behavioral health plan, but recommends additions that will address the mental health service gaps faced by infant, toddler and preschool populations:</u>

- Universal developmental, socio-emotional and psychosocial screening for children beginning at birth.
- Screen for environmental risk like maternal depression and substance abuse, and treatment (or referral of treatment) of parents.

110 Bartholomew Avenue, Suite 4030, Hartford, CT 06106
860.819.3647, earlychildhoodalliance.com

- Expand home visiting programs.
- Expand available treatment for young children ages birth through five.
- Finance increased treatment by ensuring early childhood mental health services in the home are covered by Medicaid and commercial insurance.

The Alliance supports SB 843, An act concerning trauma-informed practice training for teachers, administrators and pupil personnel. Over 25,000 children per year experience some form of trauma.[3] For many, the effects can be long-lasting and can result in difficulty in various aspects of school. The better our teachers and school personnel understand the causes and effects of trauma, the more successful they will be in providing an academic environment which can ensure positive education outcomes.

The Alliance supports SB 925, An act establishing a home visitation program consortium. We have many very excellent home visiting programs in Connecticut, most are housed in the Office of Early Childhood, but not all. The establishment of a consortium for coordination between programs will help strengthen our system of home visitation, and share training opportunities. We applaud the strong representation of home visiting programs on the consortium.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about these issues. I welcome any questions that you may have.

[1] & [2] "The Earlier, The Better: Developmental Screening for Connecticut's Young Children," Child Health & Development Institute, October 2013

[3] "Building a Statewide Trauma-Informed System of Care," Child Health & Development Institute, December 2013