



**Testimony in Support of SB 841
Committee on Children**

Respectfully Submitted by Darcy Lowell, MD
Founder & CEO, Child First
Board of Directors, Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health

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Good afternoon, Senator Bartolomeo and Representative Urban, and members of the Committee on Children. My name is Dr. Darcy Lowell. I am Founder & CEO of Child First, an evidence-based, two-generation, early childhood intervention serving Connecticut's most vulnerable young children and their families.

I am here representing both the CT Association for Infant Mental Health and Child First to offer support for SB 841 - An act concerning the implementation of a Comprehensive Children's Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan.

The CT Children's Behavioral Health Plan goes far in providing excellent recommendations and direction for the creation of a children's behavioral health system. With regard to early childhood mental health, the plan demonstrates great forethought with the inclusion of a workforce development component, recognizing that those who work with young children need very specific training. The plan also emphasizes social-emotional screening for young children, which is critical to identifying children with significant emotional or behavioral concerns.

However, **screening and identification are not enough**. The plan must provide **critically needed early childhood, evidence-based, mental health intervention and treatment for young children and their families**. This is the most effective mechanism to **prevent serious mental health disability, academic failure, and physical disease in later years, resulting in significant cost savings for the State of CT.**

The science is very clear. Chronic stress and trauma damage the developing brain of the young child, leading to long term impairment in mental health, physical health, and learning. We know that early nurturing relationships are able to **prevent this damage** from occurring. The need for infant and early childhood mental health intervention is enormous. In 2014, DCF reported that 18,700 children, ages zero to five, were victims of abuse and neglect, and of this figure, over 4,600 were infants under the age of one year. Child First, an early childhood evidence-based intervention, has a waitlist of almost 300 children, and only serves 50% of the cities and towns in our state. Connecticut's **youngest and most vulnerable children** and their primary caregivers are in urgent need of a comprehensive, early childhood mental health service system. Babies cannot wait. They are our future. Serving them early is the key to real prevention of serious emotional and behavioral disability.

The good news is that—with the leadership of this Committee and others from around the state, we are poised to advance incredibly important mechanisms of support for young children and the family members who care for them. We would like to offer the following recommendations to enhance the CT Children's Behavioral Health Plan:

Recommendation # 1:

- **Strengthen and expand provisions within the CT Children’s Behavioral Health Plan that clearly address early childhood, evidence-based, mental health intervention and treatment.**

Expand the capacity for evidence-based, trauma-informed, early childhood mental health intervention, so that this service is available to any child throughout the state. (Note: The need is for intervention **early in life**, when trauma and adversity cause major damage to the developing brain.)

Recommendation # 2:

- **Ensure that the mental health treatment for young children is developmentally appropriate and focuses on the relationship between children and their primary caregivers.**

Strengthen and expand early childhood mental health programs that provide dyadic, two-generation, trauma-informed approaches that focus on the nurturing relationship between caregiver and child, because research has shown this **strategy protects the developing brain from the damage due to stress and trauma.**

Recommendation #3:

- **Parent involvement must include screening for and addressing parental challenges – like depression, substance abuse, child trauma, and domestic violence – because this adversity has proven to be toxic to the emotional, cognitive, and physical development of young children.**

This means that we must insure all children are **screened for environmental risk** so that we are able to connect parents with needed services and supports, like treatment for parental substance abuse, mental health disorders, domestic violence, homelessness, food insecurity, and more.

Eighty thousand children under the age of 5 live in low-income households. Twenty-five to fifty percent - as many as **20,000 to 40,000** - of these mothers may suffer from **maternal depression**. We know that this has very grave consequences for the mental health and cognitive development of young children. For this reason, we need to provide **in-home** services for **maternal depression** with funding through a Medicaid waiver.

Recommendation # 4:

- **Develop an early childhood mental health system, which includes a continuum of evidence-based interventions from low to high intensity, to efficiently meet the level of family need, delivered in a variety of family-friendly settings.**

Develop a working group of **infant and early childhood**, developmental, and mental health experts from both within and **outside of the state system** to evaluate, assess the efficacy and developmental appropriateness, and ensure a continuum of services available to children from birth through 5 years of age.

Recommendation # 5:

- **Finance the expansion of infant and early childhood mental health intervention.**

Ensure early childhood, evidence-based mental health services in the home are covered by both **Medicaid and commercial insurance**. Consider **Social Impact Bonds** (or Pay for Success) as an innovative, cost-effective financing strategy.

Recommendation # 6:

- Given the need for prevention and intervention **early in life**, it is essential to include **early childhood representation** on the new CT Children's Behavioral Health Advisory Board, including advocacy groups, providers, and parents.

Investing in early childhood mental health treatment services will dramatically decrease the need for school-based and expensive deep end services, leading to significant cost savings for the State of CT.

We have an incredible opportunity to make a profound difference in the lives of our children by investing our efforts when they are very young.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify before you today.

