

Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Department of Children and Families

Edie Joseph, Kenneth Feder, Nicholas DeFiesta,
Cyd Oppenheimer, J.D., Sharon Langer, J.D., M.Ed.
Appropriations Committee
February 27, 2015

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am a Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that promotes the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Underlying our work at Voices for Children is the fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, or geography should be assured of a meaningful opportunity to achieve their full potential. For some children, such meaningful opportunity cannot exist absent state intervention, supports and services. **For those children, Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) bears a unique responsibility.**

Connecticut Voices for Children opposes the Governor's proposed \$15.7 million (-1.9%) reduction in funding for DCF. Over the period from FY09 to FY15, DCF's appropriation has fallen 21% in inflation adjusted 2014-15 dollars.

DCF's budget cuts are part of a troubling and problematic overall dis-investment in Connecticut's young people. As Connecticut Voices for Children explained in our recent report on the budget, "A third of Connecticut's General Fund is spent on children, yet over half of the cuts in the Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2016 are in funding that supports Connecticut's children and their families. These cuts, totaling \$316.4 million, are part of a larger proposal to close the State's deficit of over \$1 billion in the coming fiscal year. The deficit is partially a result of contractually obligated expenses, such as state employee fringe benefits and interest due on the money Connecticut borrowed in previous years. But just as we must keep our promises to retired workers and to our lenders, we must also maintain our promise to the next generation: that every child will be able to grow up healthy, safe, and with the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. **While the Governor's budget proposal attempts to offset some of the most painful cuts with new revenues, overall children and their families are being asked to foot more than their share of the State's fiscal woes.**"¹

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is entrusted with the responsibility of protecting and promoting the welfare of Connecticut's children and their families. DCF's mission is to create and sustain families who can meet children's developmental needs. **In times of great economic hardship it is even more important for the state to invest money in DCF to ensure that the best possible outcomes for children as well as their families are achieved.**

This testimony will focus on 1) the need for investment in DCF's child protection services, and 2) the proposed transfer of juvenile justice services from the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) to DCF and the cut of \$10 million to pre-adjudication services.

I. Need for Investment in Child Protection Services²

A series of recent reforms, coupled with a falling foster care population that mirrors a national trend, have helped make the proposed reductions to DCF possible. These reforms include:

- Diverting low risk cases away from foster care and toward community services;
- Relying on relatives to be foster parents whenever possible;
- Placing fewer children in congregate care settings; and
- Placing fewer children out of State.

Reforms such as reducing overreliance on congregate care and “rightsizing” the agency’s caseload by diverting low-risk cases to community providers are best practice and have created cost savings on the one end. **However, the success of these reforms is contingent on sufficient reinvestment of saved funds into services and supports for the unique needs of children and youth who remain in DCF care.**

In particular:

- With low risk cases diverted away from the department, every child who remains in DCF care has complex needs. Social workers require a lower caseload to meet these needs.
- A robust array of community services must be available to meet the needs of families diverted away from the foster care system.
- Relative caregivers often struggle with similar challenges to birth parents, and require specialized support.
- Foster parents will need enhanced support to adequately care for the more complex children placed with them, who might previously have been placed in congregate care.
- Research is shedding light on the need for reinvestment in previously poorly understood areas, among them transitional supports and educational supports.

Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence suggests inadequate investment in these services and supports. The DCF budget has been falling for several years now, threatening the well-being of our state’s most vulnerable children and families. Successive years of funding cuts, coupled with an increasingly complex caseload, have placed increasing strain on the agency. In fact, DCF remains under federal court supervision to meet the needs of children in its care; the federal court-appointed monitor continues to caution against efforts to save money by reducing congregate care and caseloads absent meaningful investment in frontline staffing and development of services that meet the complex needs of those children remaining in care.³ The state’s failure to adequately invest money into DCF to improve care quality is jeopardizing the well-being of our state’s most vulnerable children to whom we owe a special responsibility.

In particular, we oppose cuts to the Board and Care – Foster line item, which includes cuts to the Work to Learn program. Work to Learn is an important program which assists youth in successfully transitioning out of the foster care system by providing them critical job training, business, and life skills. Without adequate supports and services –such as the Work to Learn program—youth who exit the foster care system are at increased risk for homelessness, job insecurity, and poverty.

To ensure the success of Connecticut’s future, this legislature must prevent cuts to, and re-invest in, DCF’s budget.

II. Realignment of Juvenile Justice Services

The budget also includes a significant realignment of juvenile justice services, including a \$114 million transfer of juvenile programs from the Judicial Department's Court Support Services Division (CSSD) into the Department of Children and Families (DCF). This transfer includes a \$9.9 million cut to juvenile programs. (Because of this transfer, the DCF budget appears to grow from \$828 million to \$929 million on paper, though without the transfer it actually declines by \$15.7 million or 1.9%.)

We oppose the movement of juvenile justice functions from CSSD to DCF as well as the \$9.9 million in cuts of pre-adjudication services.

First, CSSD is structurally well-positioned to continue serving the needs of juvenile justice involved youth. Currently, CSSD is responsible for 97% of the juvenile justice system, and runs this system in line with national best practices, which are towards providing juvenile justice services that focus on keeping children in-home and within their communities whenever possible.⁴ In contrast, DCF is responsible for the 3% of juvenile justice services for youth who have been deemed to need out-of-home placement and incarceration.⁵

Moreover, CSSD has an established history of data-driven, evidence-based, and cost-effective programs and services for at-risk and juvenile justice involved youth. CSSD oversaw Connecticut's "Raise the Age" reforms, which raised the age of juvenile jurisdiction to 18. Researchers from SUNY Albany recently reported that comparing samples from 2009, when 16-year-olds were still considered adults, and 2010, when 16-year-olds were considered juveniles, 16-year-olds processed as juveniles were about 38% less likely to be re-arrested in the two-year follow-up as those processed as adults in the prior year.⁶ **As a state we are safer today and we are spending less money on juvenile crime. CSSD, the department that spearheaded these reforms, should retain control over these services in the juvenile justice system.**

In addition, we oppose the \$9.9 million cut in funding for pre-adjudication services for youth. Pre-adjudication programs and services – such as trauma services, services for status offenders, mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment and family therapy – meet young people's needs before they enter into the deepest end of the juvenile justice system. Investment in the front-end of the juvenile justice system reduces recidivism and saves the money.

We are confident that with adequate resources, together we can work towards ensuring that all children in Connecticut can grow up in safe and supportive homes and communities.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or any other staff members with any questions.

Thank you,

Edie Joseph
Policy Fellow
Connecticut Voices for Children

¹ See, “Impact of the Governor’s FY2016 Budget on Children,” Connecticut Voices for Children, February 2015. Available at: <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/impact-governors-fy-2016-budget-children>.

² This section is taken from Connecticut Voices for Children’s December 2014 report “Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care,” Edie Joseph and Kenneth Feder. Available at: <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/because-relationships-matter-improving-opportunities-and-outcomes-youth-foster-care>.

³ See, “Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan, Quarterly Report, April 1, 2014 - June 30, 2014 Civil Action No. 2:89 CV 859 (SRU). Available at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/agency/pdf/2nd_qtr_report_2014_final.pdf.

⁴ See, “Facts and Figures on Connecticut’s Juvenile Justice System,” Office of Policy and Management. Available at: <http://www.ct.gov/opm/cwp/view.asp?a=2974&q=471564>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kurlychek, M. and Fowler, E. University of Albany, *Preliminary Draft Raise the Age: Evaluating Connecticut’s Experience*. Preliminary Draft. Presented to Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, February 11, 2014. P. 10