

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
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**TESTIMONY OF SARAH EAGAN, CHILD ADVOCATE FOR
THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT, REGARDING THE BUDGET FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES
MARCH 6, 2015**

Good afternoon, Representative Walker, Senator Bye, Senator Kane, Representative Ziobron, and distinguished members of the committee. The Office of the Child Advocate respectfully submits this testimony opposing the proposed dramatic reduction in funding for Voluntary Services for children with co-occurring intellectual disability and emotional/behavioral or mental health needs served by the Department of Developmental Services.

The statutory obligations of the OCA are to review concerns, investigate where necessary, and make recommendations regarding how our state-funded systems meet the needs of children.

The Office of the Child Advocate recognizes and appreciates the support of the Governor and this Legislature for its collective efforts to maintain the safety net for our most vulnerable children and families during these extremely difficult fiscal times.

With regard to DDS's proposed budget, the Office of the Child Advocate would like to highlight the following:

Calls for Help to OCA for Children with Special Needs

Each year, the Office of the Child Advocate responds to hundreds of citizens' calls for help regarding children--often children with significant developmental, intellectual and emotional/ disorders who can't get the support they need.

Families that call OCA describe themselves as “at their wits end,” “desperate,” and are anguished for their children.

Cuts to DDS voluntary services for families will be potentially devastating.

*****Every child has the need and the right to live in the community with spirit, vitality and opportunity.**

Voluntary services supports include:

- supervision and assistance with activities of daily living;
- access to community activities;
- functional skill development;
- implementation and training of positive behavior strategies;
- respite; and
- specialized after school programs.

Voluntary services help families who may feel desperate and hopeless keep their children in their homes.

Diminished Voluntary Services for Children and Families Risks the Following:

1. Unnecessary and prolonged institutionalization of children with special needs;
2. Separation of families who cannot care for their children without help;
3. Increase in Emergency Department utilization for children with complex developmental and mental health disorders;
4. Diminished quality of life for children with special needs and their families.

People living with developmental challenges, children included, want to live their lives like the rest of us.

World Health Organization (2012): “If children with developmental delays or disabilities and their families are not provided with timely and appropriate early intervention, support and protection, their difficulties can become severe—often leading to lifetime consequences, increased poverty and profound exclusion.”

The Office of the Child Advocate appreciates the extremely difficult choices that the state is forced to make during these challenging fiscal times, and that no budget cut is an easy one.

However, the provision of services so that persons with disabilities can live healthy lives in the least restrictive environment is a moral and legal imperative.

Thank you.