

Testimony of Tracey Madden-Hennessey
Associate Director
YWCA New Britain
Before the Appropriations Committee
February 16, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Committee,

My name is Tracey Madden-Hennessey and I am the Associate Director of the YWCA New Britain. I am also the Vice Chair of The New Britain Coalition for Youth.

Although I recognize how difficult decisions will be regarding the budget this year, I am testifying to support funding for several programs and initiatives that have had a dramatic and positive impact on New Britain's children. I also want to *strongly* oppose the collapsing of line-items into agency operations budgets. This proposal is a shift of the balance of powers that have been a fundamental principle of our democracy: that of the power of the purse lies with the people. If implemented, this proposal will decrease transparency, and result in great uncertainty among programs that serve our children.

As you are aware, New Britain struggles with many of the same social and economic issues as Connecticut's largest cities. More than 80% of its student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch indicating a high percentage of children living in poverty. Test scores for city youth have historically been at the bottom or near the bottom of scores when compared with other municipalities. The city serves a large percentage of youth with special needs and large numbers of children whose first language is not English requiring different and additional accommodation and intervention.

However, most recently there have been many bright spots in New Britain that indicate progress is being made to change these conditions with funding from some of the very initiatives that the Governor's budget has recommended to cut or reduce. Several efforts are being recognized both in Connecticut and nationally for the promising outcomes they are producing.

First, I am requesting that you restore funding for Community Plans for Early Childhood and the Early Literacy Grant. Although small in nature, this funding supports the work of Community Coalitions using data to create solutions to improve outcomes for children and strategies related directly to literacy development. The Coalition for New Britain's Youth and its work is our local example. This funding is critical as it leverages other private funds that support highly successful projects. Dollars in New Britain have supported:

- Advocacy for **increased access to preschool**, vital in a district where only a third of children are reading on grade level by third grade. New Britain five year olds entering kindergarten with an early childhood experience has increased from 38% in 2003 to 78% in 2014.

- A collaborative effort to reduce the rate of **chronic absenteeism** at the elementary schools. Chronic absenteeism dropped from 19.5% in 2012 to 13.0% in 2013. And the 2013 rate is less than half the 2010 rate of 29%. This project has been so successful the Coalition is expanding its scope to local School Readiness Programs where the rate of chronic absenteeism is higher than in the K-12 system. New Britain has been recognized for this effort nationally by The Casey Foundation and The Campaign for Grade Level Reading. It is the primary reason the city was named a National Pacesetter by The National League of Cities.
- A groundbreaking, non-traditional **Summer School Program** called Summer SEE. The Coalition facilitated a partnership between the School District and Community Based Organizations to offer a summer school experience to the lowest scoring students in the District. A combination of the traditional summer classroom experience coupled with aligned enrichment activities, outcomes related to SEE indicate the program significantly reduces the impact of Summer Learning Loss. Summer Learning Loss is a phenomenon that negatively impacts poor children who don't have access to summer enrichment and sets the stage for an increasing skills gap between them and more affluent peers. It is often the principle reason that poor children find themselves on a trajectory to dropping out of school. Students who participate in SEE are less likely to suffer Summer Learning Loss than non-participating peers, less likely to exhibit behaviors that remove them from the classroom for discipline than non-participating peers, and show gains in specific literacy development skills after participation. This model is of such high interest to other districts hoping to replicate it, that New Britain representatives have been asked to present at National Conferences in Texas, Washington DC, Indianapolis, and in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

The loss of the State's support will also result in the loss of matching and program funds that are contributed through private donations and foundation.

Given the way reductions have been proposed, it is difficult to identify which programs will receive priority in the upcoming year. Therefore, I am asking you to support and protect the following funding which supports low income children and their families:

- ❖ School Readiness and Quality Enhancement funding
- ❖ Care 4 Kids childcare subsidy funding
- ❖ After School and youth employment funding.

These programs all benefit children and youth and support their on-going academic success.

Thank you for your attention.