

Testimony Regarding:

S.B. 180: An Act Concerning Permanency Hearings, Youth Advisory Councils and Foster Families; S.B. 182: An Act Concerning the Identification of Connecticut's Child Placement Needs; S.B. 183: An Act Concerning the Program of Family Assessment Response; and H.B. 5135: An Act Concerning the Closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and the Pueblo Unit for Girls

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Committee on Children

February 23, 2016

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Children:

I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote 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, sexual identity, 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. Children in state care—particularly those involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems—are some of our state's most at-risk and vulnerable young people.

I am here to today to support the concepts of Senate Bills 180, 182, and 183, which all work to improve the lives of children in state care in Connecticut. I am also here today to respectfully suggest recommendations regarding House Bill 5135, which affects our juvenile justice-involved youth. While we support the closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) and the Pueblo Unit for Girls (Pueblo), we want to ensure that appropriate, therapeutic, and rehabilitative alternative programs or placements exist to meet the needs of each youth currently residing at these facilities in advance of their closure.

I. Support for Senate Bill 180

First, we support S.B. 180, which includes provisions that require:

- 1. Transportation to permanency hearings for youth ages 12 and above.** Over the past several years, DCF has made important strides in promoting permanency and normalcy for youth in foster care. Last year, Connecticut passed Public Act 15-199, which required that

youth ages 12 and above be engaged in permanency planning.. In discussions with youth and adolescents in care, transportation has emerged as a key barrier to full, meaningful participation in permanency and case planning. The proposed bill requires that the DCF Commissioner arrange for the youth to be present, and provide transportation as needed. This would strengthen the state's existing commitment to youth engagement in permanency planning, and ensure the full implementation of the intent of earlier legislation.

- 2. Foster family profiles.** The proposed bill requires that DCF create family profiles for all foster families, so that children may familiarize themselves with the household before moving in. At Connecticut Voices for Children's Youth at the Capitol Day event, DCF-involved youth advocates shared the challenges of entering someone's home, not knowing what to expect. In many of their experiences, these unnamed or unclear expectations contributed to negative relationships with the caregivers in these homes. While DCF does not regularly report data regarding foster care placement disruptions, past analysis suggests that a number of children change placements while in the care of the agency.¹ Last year, DCF Youth Advisory Board members developed the Adolescents in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations, outlining the expectations, roles, and responsibilities of youth and caregivers in foster care.² The proposed bill would build on existing DCF efforts to establish expectations by giving youth the opportunity to learn about and prepare for a new home before their move-in date.
- 3. Foster family surveys.** The proposed bill requires that DCF administer surveys to foster children and youth who are removed from or leave a foster family within 15 days of departure. By developing and administering such a survey, DCF can collect more robust, standardized feedback about the experiences of youth in foster care placements. These data may be useful in training and quality improvement efforts going forward.
- 4. Youth advisory councils in certain congregate care facilities.** The proposed bill would require certain congregate care facilities to establish youth advisory councils. DCF has long been committed to providing leadership and advocacy opportunities for the youth in its care; youth can join the Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) in each area office, the Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) in each DCF region, or the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC). In these organizations, youth can promote improvements to DCF policies, practice public speaking skills, work on team-building, build connections with other youth in DCF care, and learn to participate meaningfully as advocates. For youth in more restrictive settings, like intensive congregate care placements, participation in these programs may not be possible. Youth in these placements often have more complex therapeutic or clinical needs, with busy program schedules. Programs may require adjustment periods, in which residents can only leave the facility for school. Even with time and permission, many youth in congregate placements find that transportation remains a challenge; certain youth can only travel when

accompanied by a designated staff member, and that staff member may be unable or unwilling to provide transportation for a variety of reasons. Though both child welfare and juvenile justice-involved youth are allowed to participate in the many leadership and advocacy programs that DCF offers, they face practical barriers to doing so. For larger congregate facilities, the proposed youth advisory councils may offer a setting in which youth can practice the same empowering skills while sidestepping practical challenges. Whether these councils can ultimately be incorporated in the YAB system to encourage peer interaction is a matter of policy and feasibility; either way, youth in care will benefit.

II. Support for Senate Bill 182

Second, we support S.B. 182, which requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to report annually on all children residing or placed in out-of-state facilities. Over the past decade, DCF has made important strides in reducing the number of children in out-of-home and out-of-state care. The recent Court Monitor's report noted that only 6 children were placed out-of-state in 2015, as compared to 374 children placed out-of-state in 2005.³ This shift in practice to in-state care is developmentally appropriate and follows research-based child welfare best practice standards.⁴ This legislation builds on the progress DCF has already made by requiring a report and needs assessment for all children placed out-of-state. While currently DCF's Federal Court Monitor reports this data, it is important that the agency has the infrastructure in place to continue tracking and monitoring this key data in the future, particularly when DCF is no longer under court supervision. In addition, this data will give us a better understanding of the unmet needs of DCF-involved youth in our state.

III. Support for Senate Bill 183

Third, we support S.B. 183, which requires DCF to report annually on the status of the Family Assessment Response (FAR) program. The FAR program, a strength-based needs assessment and community-based service program, is offered to low-risk families in which the child has been found to be safe. Over the past decade, DCF has moved to keep children with family members whenever possible, and place them in family settings when removal is needed. When the Department first sought to implement a differential response system, it published a set of outcome and reporting measures it planned to track.⁵ While some data from the first three years of the system are available to the general public online, annual reporting would enable stakeholders to track the implementation and performance of the FAR program. By committing to transparency and accountability, the state can ensure that it is best serving children and families.

IV. Recommendations regarding House Bill 5135

Finally, we respectfully make the following recommendations regarding H.B. 5135, which requires DCF to close CJTS and Pueblo no later than January 1, 2017. We applaud the state's

commitment to closing these facilities as part of the broader juvenile justice reform effort underway in Connecticut. The state's primary goal should remain the development of a robust continuum of care, including community-based preventative, diversionary, therapeutic, and rehabilitative services, to meet the needs of all juvenile justice-involved youth. Before closing CJTS and Pueblo, policymakers must ensure that there exist alternate placements to meet the diverse needs of the youth who currently reside there. Following a comprehensive needs assessment and treatment planning process for each youth, the state can safely close these facilities. We therefore express concern as to whether this process can be completed by January 1, 2017 without putting the juvenile justice-involved youth in these institutions at increased risk.

When young people are served in appropriate, community-based settings and go on to lead productive adult lives, the state saves money on costly incarceration, and lives up to its moral imperative to give young people the opportunity of a bright future. Closing these facilities is an important part of the broader, ongoing effort to improve our juvenile system and ensure better outcomes for our youth.

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,

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¹ See "CT BHP ValueOptions Foster Care Pilot Project Quality Improvement Activity." Available at: http://www.ctbhp.com/reports/CT_BHP_Foster_Care_Disruption_Study.pdf.

² See "Adolescents in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations." Available at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/yab/pdf/adolescents_in_care_bill_of_rights_and_expectations.pdf.

³ See "Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan, Status Report, April 1, 2015 - June 30, 2015 Civil Action No. 2:89 CV 859 (SRU)." Available at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/positive_outcomes/pdf/status_report_2015_final.pdf; See also "Juan F. v. Rell Exit Plan, Civil Action No. H-89-859 (AHN), Exit Plan Outcome Measures, Summary Report, 1st Quarter 2005, January 1, 2005-March 31, 2005." Available at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/LIB/dcf/positive_outcomes/pdf/1Q_2005_Report.pdf.

⁴ For more, see *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>.

⁵ The Department's Evaluation and Outcome measures can be viewed on their website at: http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/drs/pdf/drs_outcomes.pdf.