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Good evening. My name is Marcia Hughes and I work at the Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford. Since 2008 my colleagues and I have been conducting regular evaluation of the *Help Me Grow* program. We also recently conducted a study examining the impact of *Help Me Grow* on parents' knowledge of child development and program services and on parents' perceptions of their child's behavior, family functioning, and ability to better handle things (Hughes, Joslyn, Wojton, O'Reilly, & Dworkin, 2016). I am here to speak on what we have learned from evaluation and research on *Help Me Grow*.

Help Me Grow is a prevention program administered by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood in collaboration with the United Way of Connecticut/211. It is designed to identify children at risk for developmental or behavioral problems and connect these children to existing community resources. Towards this end, Help Me Grow provides care coordination support to families, training on developmental screening for pediatricians, and also sponsors networking meetings for community-based service agencies. Tonight I will specifically speak on care coordination provided for families.

Anybody in Connecticut who has a concern about a child's behavior or development can call Help Me Grow, accessed by calling the Child Development Infoline, a statewide toll free number located at the United Way. Since the program's inception, first as a pilot program in Hartford in 1997, and then as a statewide initiative in 2002, thousands of parents in CT needing help with their child have called. Many parents are referred by their pediatrician or another care provider. When they call *Help Me Grow*, the phone is answered by a care coordinator who has a broad knowledge base of child development and available resources and services, and has been trained on how to build rapport and interview families about their concerns for their child.

Why is Help Me Grow so important? - - Because for the majority of families, it can be very difficult to figure out what services are available and to understand how they work. Services are often a mix of programs, and each program has its own set of responsibilities, positions, and policies. For a family struggling to understand their child's development or behavior, it can be especially confusing to figure out what's needed, where to go, and who to talk to. Care coordinators will listen to family concerns, help them sort out what they need, and will then research available programs and services (in the family's community) and contact agencies to verify program information. Once the care coordinator has

all the information, she calls the family back, lets them know the services and supports that are available (will (e)mail program information), with whom to speak at the relevant agencies, what questions to ask and, when necessary, how to complete application materials. The care coordinator will then follow up with the family to find out if they were connected to services or if they need further assistance.

Program evaluation since 2008 has shown that families are successfully connected to a needed service four out of five times (Hughes & Joslyn, 2014). In the study we recently published (Hughes et al., 2016) we contacted 85 parents by phone and administered a survey to assess the impact of *Help Me Grow* on parents' perceptions of their circumstances and their child's development. Analysis of survey results indicated that *Help Me Grow* support to families and their connection to programs and services enhanced parents' perceptions of factors known to strengthen families. During phone conversations, we learned firsthand about their experience contacting *Help Me Grow*:

- A parent who called because she was concerned about a possible developmental delay with her toddler was referred to the Ages & Stages Child Monitoring Program (series of parent-completed questionnaires on child's development from 3 mo to 5 years of age). She told us *"Now I feel more equipped and reassured...I know what to expect, and my gut feeling is stronger now."*
- Another parent who attended a child-parent class as a result of calling *Help Me Grow* stated, *"I am more consistent with discipline...our daily life has improved, less arguing and yelling."*
- A mother who was connected to a parent support group stated *"Now I am friends with a mother whose child also has Fragile X syndrome and we figure out our problems around that together."*
- A mom in crisis called because her child was referred for intensive behavioral intervention but their insurance only covered a portion of the cost. *Help Me Grow* connected the family to an agency that specifically raises funds for families with this type of need. The mom reported the services that she ultimately received *"made it a lot easier"* for her and that since the initiation of the phone call, *"I have a better outlook, and a better relationship with my child."*

The quality of parent-child relationships is one of the most robust predictors of child outcomes, and in turn, the quality of parental care is dependent on the nature of surrounding stressors and supports. For a family with a child who has a developmental or behavioral problem, parents' belief in their ability to manage their child's care are better predictors of parental stress and child outcomes than the child's disability or problem itself. *Help Me Grow* support to families and their connection to programs and services positively shifted parents' attitudes and behavior even among families with differing needs. *Help Me Grow* helps contribute to more engaged, supported, and educated parents who feel better equipped to meet their children's needs and foster healthy developmental outcomes.

I respectfully state that cutting funds for *Help Me Grow* would be a mistake and ask that you support keeping it in the State budget.

Thank you.