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HB-05044 OEC: Appropriations Committee, February 16, 2016

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Melissa Mendez, and I am the Director of Early Childhood Services at Wheeler Clinic. I would like to thank you for providing this opportunity to speak today on behalf of my colleagues and the hundreds of infants, children and families we serve each year through Wheeler's early childhood programs.

Wheeler provides a comprehensive continuum of mental health and substance abuse recovery, primary care, community justice, education, child welfare, and early childhood services across Connecticut. The individuals and families we serve include some of the most vulnerable populations in our state including infants and toddlers who struggle with serious developmental, cognitive and physical challenges, as well as poor attachment with their primary caregivers. Many of these young children live in home environments that include domestic violence, substance abuse and/or serious mental health issues. Our early childhood services help these young and very vulnerable children make significant gains that help prepare them for future success in school and in life, as well as help their families provide safe, stable and nurturing home environments. These services are already chronically in short supply based on demand across the state. As such, we strongly oppose any cut to funding of the state's early childhood programs. Any reductions will have a devastating impact on the thousands of children and families served by these programs each year.

Decades of research in psychology, neuroscience and economics have established that investments in early childhood benefit children, families and the greater society. Experts agree that making investments in young children results in greater returns in education, health and job productivity.¹ The estimated return for every \$1 invested in early childhood is \$7.² The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study reinforces the research around the benefits of early childhood investment and suggests that early adversity leads to risk factors that are highly related with adult chronic illness, poor quality of life and early death.

The evidence-based approaches and practices in Connecticut's early childhood service system are designed to help children build skills, as well as help facilitate nurturing connections and attachment between children and caregivers that can "buffer" children's brains from adverse experiences that may pose a threat on their path to a healthy developmental trajectory.

¹ Bartik, Timothy J. 2014. "From Preschool to Prosperity: The Economic Payoff to Early Childhood Education."

² National Institute for Early Childhood Education Research.

Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood represents Connecticut's commitment to, and investment in, the health and well-being of our state's infants and toddlers. The programs, services and partnerships that the OEC maintains represent research-based best practices designed to mitigate the long term medical, mental health and educational needs that result from unrecognized early trauma, poor attachment, untreated developmental delays, and persistent family dysfunction. The positive outcomes achieved serve as one of Connecticut's key strategies for supporting the reduction of the achievement gap for children in racial and ethnic disparate groups which weighs heavily on the state's education and public health systems.

Connecticut is currently viewed as a leader and champion in the area of early childhood across the nation. Efforts and investments for young children in Connecticut are innovative and cost effective. With rising rates of young children (0-5 years) in poverty, a 17% increase from 2008 to 2013, the state cannot afford not to maintain the commitment to early childhood investments.³ We know that poverty brings increased risks for young children and families. Their needs are significant and given the knowledge we have of early childhood brain development, we know their needs are also urgent.

The needs of young children and their families who require these critical services will go unmet if these services are no longer available to them. In fact, their needs will grow over time and the cost of meeting these needs through higher enrollment in special education, more costly and longer term mental health services and on-going medical care will be far more expensive and less effective.

We respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee act to prevent any cuts to the State's early childhood services.



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³ *One in Seven Children in Poverty in Connecticut in 2013*. (2014). CT Voices for Children.