

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
February 18, 2016**

Good afternoon, Representative Walker, Senator Bye, Senator Kane, Representative Ziobron, and distinguished members of the committee. The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) respectfully submits this testimony in support of the allocation of adequate resources for critically needed home and community based supports 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.

OCA 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 despite our current budget crisis. OCA fully support efforts to increase transparency and accountability, as well as those that require cooperation and collaboration across all service systems.

With regard to DDS's proposed budget, the OCA would like to offer the following:

Calls for Help to OCA for Children with Special Needs

OCA responds to hundreds of citizens' calls for help regarding children annually; often children with significant developmental, intellectual and emotional disorders who cannot access required supports. Their families are often in crisis; their child stuck in the emergency room for days on end, or languishing in an inpatient psychiatric unit waiting for services that are not available. Lack of access to appropriate (or sometimes, any) services unnecessarily results in harmful and unsafe circumstances for children and their families. We are told of a dearth of contracted providers with expertise in working with children with developmental disorders in most areas of the state.

Connecticut remains challenged in its ability to timely identify and address evolving child and family needs to circumvent family crisis. Systems of care are often fractured and ineffective, rendering many families desperate and hopeless.

Over the past several years, Connecticut has seen significant improvement in access and availability of critically needed home and community-based behavioral health services for children. However, many

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children with complex developmental challenges require specialized services currently **unavailable or inaccessible** such as:

- 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.

Repeated cuts to the DDS budget have resulted in diminished access to these critically needed services and 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.

OCA supports the creation of an interagency task force to ensure the effective delivery of state-funded services to children and youth with developmental disabilities with or without co-occurring mental health treatment needs. Undoubtedly, a continuum of care is necessary to meet the evolving, and oftentimes, complex needs of children with special needs as they mature and transition through different phases of development.

OCA is cognizant of the difficult choices that the Governor and this Legislature must make during these increasingly challenging fiscal times. However, the provision of services so that children with disabilities can grow and develop within their families and communities, alongside their peers, is a moral and legal imperative.

Thank you again for the opportunity and I look forward to our continued work together.