

**A TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE  
REGARDING AN ACT CONCERNING THE POSTING OF CARELINE  
INFORMATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**

**MARCH 2, 2016**

Good morning, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle, and distinguished members of the committee. I am Micheala Mitchell, testifying on behalf of the Child Advocate of the State of Connecticut, Sarah Eagan. The Child Advocate thanks you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of **S.B. AN ACT CONCERNING**

***THE POSTING OF CARELINE INFORMATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.***

The primary statutory obligations of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) include evaluation and reporting regarding the efficacy of publicly-funded child-serving systems throughout the state. OCA meets regularly with lawmakers, policy-makers and other stakeholders to review and advocate for policies and practices that will promote children's well-being and safety. OCA also responds to daily calls for help regarding children with specialized needs.

Children of every gender, age, race, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic status and family structure are at risk for child abuse and neglect. Accordingly, protecting children from abuse and neglect is a community responsibility.

**Children are most vulnerable to child sexual abuse between the ages of 7 and 13.<sup>1</sup> The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18.<sup>2</sup>**

In 2013, over 7,000 children in Connecticut were *documented* victims of abuse or neglect. Of these children, 88.2% were neglected, 6.6% were physically abused, and 5.7% were sexually abused.<sup>3</sup> ***Even these large numbers cannot account for the number of children who had no one to speak up for them or who were unable to speak up for themselves.***

The intent of mandatory reporting laws is to protect children. However, adults may fear reporting abuse or neglect regarding a family or they may not know that a child is being abused. The unfortunate truth is that too often children may not tell anyone when they have been abused due to guilt, shame, and confusion. Too many children believe they are mistreated because they did something to deserve it or because there is something wrong with them. Children may also be

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.parentsformeganslaw.org/public/statistics\\_childSexualAbuse.html](http://www.parentsformeganslaw.org/public/statistics_childSexualAbuse.html)

<sup>2</sup> "Child Sexual Abuse: What Parents Should Know," American Psychological Association. (<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/child-sexual-abuse.aspx>) (February 19, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Child Welfare League of America <http://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2015-State-Fact-Sheet-Connecticut.pdf>

afraid to tell an adult or they may be unsure of how to safely communicate their fears. For these reasons, a majority of child sexual abuse cases go unreported.<sup>4</sup>

The bill will help ensure that youth know how to anonymously report their own concerns of abuse or neglect to the DCF Careline. Posting information containing the toll-free Child Abuse and Neglect Careline phone number in our public schools will also increase awareness of the programs and services that are available to young victims of abuse and neglect. The key to ensuring that the bill is effective, however, is to make certain that the information provided is accessible and understandable to all children.

OCA notes that other states including Texas, Missouri and Florida have enacted similar statutes mandating that schools post the telephone number of their CPS abuse “hotlines” in *conspicuous places frequented by students*. These states further require that signage include directions to access their respective CPS website, and even more important, that these postings be written in developmentally appropriate language. It is our responsibility to ensure that a child who has made the difficult decision to report an incident of abuse has all of the information necessary to follow through with that decision. To that end, OCA encourages the legislature to adopt similar provisions in order to fully inform vulnerable youth about the ways that they can access the help they need.

#### ***AN ACT CONCERNING UNSUBSTANTIATED ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT BY SCHOOL EMPLOYEES.***

The Office of the Child Advocate is cautious about this bill because school districts must retain the ability to ensure the safety and well-being of the children in their schools. When an allegation of abuse or neglect is investigated and *not substantiated* by the Department of Children and Families, this *does not mean* that nothing happened of concern or that the behavior of the individual who is the subject of the report was appropriate. School districts may need the flexibility to review and retain the findings from such investigation which may lay out undisputed *details* regarding concerning conduct which may or may not have led to a legal finding of abuse or neglect, but which is *otherwise concerning*. OCA would be cautious about precluding school districts or any or child-serving organization from referencing or relying on otherwise concerning findings regarding the conduct of an entrusted caregiver towards a child.

#### ***AN ACT CONCERNING CRIMINAL HISTORY RECORDS CHECKS FOR HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS OF A FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME OR GROUP CHILD CARE HOME.***

The Office of the Child Advocate supports Raised Bill No. 5466 because it recognizes the need for relevant and minimal background checks for all adults who have access to a child in a licensed day care setting. It is essential that the licensing standards established by the Office of

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<sup>4</sup> CPS reports may underestimate the true occurrence of abuse and neglect. A non-CPS study estimated that 1 in 4 children experience some form of child maltreatment in their lifetimes.

Early Childhood utilize appropriate requirements to ensure the safety and well-being of children who are being served by child-serving organizations.

***AN ACT CONCERNING NOTIFICATION TO SCHOOLS OF PROTECTIVE OR RESTRAINING ORDERS AFFECTING STUDENTS.***

The Office of the Child Advocate supports the intent of Raised Bill 319 which will require the Superior Court to provide notice to a school district after granting a protective or restraining order that involves a student.

State law currently permits victims of domestic violence to ask that the court forward a copy to a school or school district. As the bill shifts this choice from the victim to a mandate for the judicial branch, OCA would simply caution that any petitioner for a restraining or protective order must be given ample and conspicuous notice, and that school districts have strict requirements and guidelines regarding maintaining the victim's confidentiality rights within the school environment.

Regarding the requirement that districts assess the risk of dangers posed or presented by the circumstances leading to the restraint or protective order, there will need to be clear guidelines, tools and training for how such risk will be assessed. Current state law (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 10-220a) requires that districts, within available appropriations, ensure provision of in-service training for district personnel on certain aspects of teen behavior that may lead to teen dating violence and domestic violence. However there is no clear and no funded mandate that district personnel have training regarding prevention and response to teen dating violence or risk assessment.

**Information from Connecticut's most recent public survey of youth risky behaviors (2013) provides that over a ¼ of students self-report being verbally or emotionally abused and 10 % of female students reported being physically hurt on purpose by a dating partner.**

The bill laudably seeks to respond to this public health issue and ensure better communication among state and local government institutions for the purpose of protecting children. This is important and commendable.

However, it will be imperative that school personnel have appropriate support, guidance and training regarding confidentiality, risk assessment, prevention and response to teen dating violence and domestic violence to support the intent and implementation of the initiatives outlined in this raised bill.

Sincerely,

*Sarah Healy Eagan*

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