Representative Abercrombie, Senator Moore, Senator Markley Kelley and members of the Human Services Committee: My name is Peg Oliveira and I am the Executive Director of the Gesell Institute of Child Development, a non-profit early childhood research and professional development organization that has worked nationally, from our headquarters in New Haven, Connecticut, for over 65 years to promote the principles of child development as the basis for all decision making for young children.

I am submitting comments in opposition to H.B. 6183: An Act Concerning Restoring Oversight of the Care 4 Kids Program to the Department of Social Services and Allowing for the Transfer of Federal Block Grant Funds to the Program. We would like the committee to consider the following: The Care 4 Kids program can best support the intent of overall state and federal funding for early care and education programs only when managed in coordination with the many other early childhood funding streams. Second, the deliberate process that led Connecticut to initially advocate to move the Care 4 Kids program out of the CT Department of Social Services must be remembered and the broader goal of moving toward a comprehensive system of care and education for children birth to age eight commended and protected. Finally, the needs of children and families must ultimately be the determinant in making this decision.

Care 4 Kids is one building block in a comprehensive system of care and education that helps families work and helps children thrive. Funding for two children in one Connecticut family can be a patchwork of grants from a confusing mix of sources. Moving all of these grants under the direction of the Office of Early Childhood was a wise financial investment by Connecticut, ensuring the direction of these funds toward a unified goal: preparing children for school and lifelong success. The Care 4 Kids program can best support the intent of overall state and federal funding for early care and education programs only when managed in coordination with the many other early childhood funding streams as it does now to both buttress Connecticut’s groundbreaking School Readiness program and reach children not eligible for these funds. This is not the job of the Connecticut Department of Social Services. Historically, when within CT DSS, the Care 4 Kids program functions solely as a welfare to work program. The intent is to create spaces where children can be warehoused so that parents can work. No vision of quality exists and as such no oversight regarding how these funds are spent. This has, in the past, left children in government funded spaces that do nothing to ensure anything beyond basic safety ignoring the goals of healthy child development or school readiness. This is a poor investment of funds and a missed opportunity to double the power of these government dollars to both help families work and help children thrive.

Protecting the legislative intent of funds allocated to Care 4 Kids becomes impossible in the Connecticut Department of Social Services. In moving Care 4 Kids back into the Department of Social Services, the thought is that funds can be transferred from TANF into Care 4 Kids more easily to cover deficits. This is a double edged sword as the funds may also be transferred out of
Care 4 Kids (not an entitlement and as such without imperative to be fully funded) to programs within CT DSS (such as entitlement programs that demand to be fully funded.) Historically, more money was transferred out of Care 4 Kids than into the program, while managed at CT DSS. This results in an erosion of the legislative intent of the allocation, meant to support child care.

Keeping Care 4 Kids out of the Connecticut Department of Social Services and within the Office of Early Childhood keeps Connecticut on par with nationally recognized best practice. Across the nation states are recognizing the need for a coordinated system of early care and education, across all funding streams and taking account of the child as the center of a system; not as a solo target. Connecticut has taken creative and positive steps in this direction with the creation of the Office of Early Childhood and the consolidation of programs and funding within this entity. Moving Care 4 Kids back to CT DSS would be a major step backwards in the effort to forge a unified system of comprehensive services for families with young children. Failing to attend to the whole child and the system of family and community within which the child resides is like building a house, without attending to the strength of the foundation. We can not take steps backwards in commitment to this foundation and still expect our children to be ready for school and competitive in the world beyond.1

In an effort to maintain momentum toward a true early care and education system and stay on par with other states in this effort, to maximize the federal dollars allocated to Connecticut for the Care 4 Kids Program, and to best serve children, we recommend:

- Retain the Care 4 Kids program within the Office of Early Childhood and independent of the Connecticut Department of Social Services.

- Sufficient appropriation to the Care 4 Kids program to allow it to open to all eligible families in need.2

- Direct TANF funds to support the Care4kids program and to access the available matching federal funds.3

- Use alternate budgeting strategies and legislative action to allow easy transfer of federal funds between the Connecticut Department of Social Services and the Office of Early Childhood to support deficits in Care 4 Kids.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony regarding H.B. 6183.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

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1 Gesell Institute of Child Development. www.gesellinstitute.org
