



## CHILDREN'S TRUST FUND COUNCIL

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Senator Harp, Representative Wood and distinguished members of the Mental Health Services Working Group, on behalf of The Children's Trust Fund Council, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments to you today.

Do you remember the old adage – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?

Well, this saying is an adapt metaphor for the thinking we need to put in place to address the tremendous challenges of mental, emotional and behavioral health in Connecticut.

Under our current system, more and more resources and more and more funding are being directed to address individuals and families after a crises has occurred – when it is difficult and costly to intervene. DMAS and other agencies are stretched to their limits as they try to address a wide variety of mental health issues.

So, if I could suggest just one step to improve our state's mental health system, it would be this – reduce the number of individuals and families with mental health disorders who come to the attention of DMAS and other state agencies.

To do this, we must employ prevention strategies - approaches that allow us to reach families and individuals **before** mental health issues occur.

Several decades of research have shown the promise and potential lifetime benefits of preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders.

**The primary focus of the Connecticut Children's Trust Fund is prevention** - to reach children and families to prevent problems that would require the involvement of the child protection, mental health or juvenile justice systems. The Trust Fund employs a number of specific interventions that can modify risk and promote protective factors that are linked to important determinants of mental, emotional and behavioral health, especially in such areas as family functioning, early childhood experiences and social skills.

And while I would like to tell you about all the worthwhile programs of the Children's Trust Fund, I will highlight three approaches that can profoundly help more families and more children have a better chance at healthy future – **Nurturing Families Network, Triple P and Help Me Grow.**

**Nurturing Families Network** is an evidence-based home visitation program that provides intervention to high risk families during the prenatal and early childhood periods. Nurturing Families Network has been shown to prevent child maltreatment. Childhood abuse and neglect is related to later criminal behavior. Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrests as a juvenile by 59 percent, as an adult by 28 percent, and for violent crime by 30 percent.

Home visitation is also an effective deterrent of later delinquency, crime and violence by interrupting the negative processes that begin during childhood and continue through adolescents. The prenatal period is an especially important time for intervention, as many factors that place a child at risk occur during pregnancy. Babies born to mothers who smoke, use drugs, and/or maintain poor diet and health during pregnancy are at increased risk of perinatal difficulties. In addition, most pregnant teens younger than 15 receive no prenatal or inadequate care and babies born to teenage mothers are at increased risk of premature delivery and/or low birth weight. These problems, in addition to other medical stresses at birth, are associated with parent- and teacher-rated behavior problems between the ages of 5 and 7, delinquency at age 18, and violence.

**The Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)** is a parenting program that provides multi-level intervention. Triple P focuses on the general population and not just individual or at-risk families. At the lowest level, the program provides brief advice for parents dealing with common childhood problems. At the final level, an enhanced Triple P provides skills and support to deal with parental depression, marital discord, or other family stresses. Triple P is the first parenting program to demonstrate longitudinal, population-level effects for parents and children. The program has been shown to reduce the number of children with clinically elevated and borderline behavioral and emotional behaviors. Findings also show a greater reduction in the prevalence of parental depression, stress and coercive parenting. Seminal research on family interactions over the past 40 years has shown that harsh and inconsistent parenting practices contribute to aggressive and uncooperative behavior and that positive involvements with children and positive reinforcement of desirable behavior contribute to pro-social and healthy behaviors.

**Help Me Grow** is a prevention program designed to identify children at risk for development or behavioral problems and connect these children to existing community resources. Each year, this program tracks the physical, social and emotional development of more than 2,500 young children each year using the highly regarded Ages and Stages Child Development Monitoring (ASQ) questionnaire to chart a child's development through the first five years of life. Research has documented the critical role that monitoring and early intervention play in a child's healthy development. Not only are lives of children improved by early intervention but the likelihood of school readiness and future well-being is also greatly enhanced. Through Help Me Grow, difficulties are identified early before they grow into more serious problems that threaten a child's future and require more expensive and intensive interventions.

As we respond to the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary school, we must start amassing the public and political will to prioritize state and federal investment in our children that can give them the right start in life, reduce mental health issues, crime and violence and give us the best hope of preventing such tragedies in the future.

By employing prevention strategies like **Nurturing Families Network**, **Triple P** and **Help Me Grow**, we have a better chance of ensuring families will stay out of the child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice systems.