

NEWS RELEASE

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Contacts: Jamey Bell, CT Voices for Children, (203) 498-4240

Jennifer Lamb or Alison Dodge, Office of Rep. Rosa DeLauro, (203) 562-3718

State Leaders Oppose Governor's Proposed Cuts to Office of the Child Advocate

Cuts Would Undermine Safety and Well-Being of Children

Dozens of elected officials and child and family service organizations have signed an open letter to Governor Rell and state legislators that expresses their opposition to Governor Rell's proposed cuts to the state's Office of the Child Advocate, the only state agency that conducts independent oversight and investigation of the state's care and protection of children. Elected officials signing the letter were Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, Senator Christopher Dodd, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, Comptroller Nancy Wyman, Treasurer Denise Nappier, and Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz. Organizations signing the letter included a broad cross-section of 18 individuals, providers, and nonprofits that provide services, research, and advocacy for children and families.

The Governor's budget proposal would eliminate the 9 member staff at the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), except for the Child Advocate herself, Jeanne Milstein. It would also move the OCA, which is now an independent state agency, to the Attorney General's office. The group's statement argued that this would diminish the independence of the Child Advocate, since the Attorney General must legally represent the state agencies that the Child Advocate is responsible for investigating. The Governor's proposal would also eliminate two oversight and advisory boards that don't cost the state any money – the Child Fatality Review Panel and the Child Advocate Advisory Board. The Child Fatality Review Panel examines unexplained or unexpected deaths of children under the age of 18 who have received services from a state department or agency addressing child welfare, social or human services or juvenile justice. Because the members of these two boards are unpaid, eliminating them would save no state funds.

The budget proposal from by the state legislature's Appropriations Committee would also make some cuts to the Child Advocate's budget, but would preserve most staff, maintain the agency's independence, and keep the Advisory and Child Fatality boards intact.

"I am dismayed that the Governor's recently released budget has recommended such funding cuts to the Office of the Child Advocate as to make it unable to truly fulfill its job of advocating on behalf of the children in Connecticut—effectively making this an office in name only. It is critical that children—among the most vulnerable among us—have someone looking out for them and their interests," said Congresswoman Rosa L. DeLauro (CT-03). "The Office of the Child Advocate ensures they have a voice."

The group's statement cited the Office of Child Advocate's accomplishments, including closing down unsafe and inappropriate residential facilities, and ensuring that the needs of youth with mental health treatment needs are met as they grow into adulthood.

“Without a strong and independent Office of the Child Advocate, children in the state's various child-serving systems would lose their most effective watchdog and advocate,” commented Jamey Bell, Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children. “The Governor's proposed cuts could seriously jeopardize the health and safety of Connecticut's children.”

For more information on the Office of the Child Advocate, see the OCA Web site: www.ct.gov/oca.

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August 12, 2009

An Open Letter to Governor Rell and Connecticut Legislators

We are profoundly worried about Connecticut's children. The recently released budgets of the Governor and the Appropriations Committee include choices that will have an extraordinary impact on the immediate and long-term well-being of our most vulnerable children and their families. As you move forward, we urge you to keep Connecticut's children—our state's most vulnerable current and future resource—at the forefront of each and every budget decision.

The climate of fiscal uncertainty creates an urgent need for government transparency and accountability. **In Connecticut, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) is the only state agency with statutory authority to provide independent oversight and monitoring of the care and protection of the state's children.** OCA has responsibility to investigate and evaluate state-funded and state-operated programs and services for children, identify areas in need of attention, and make recommendations to protect the rights of Connecticut's youngest citizens. State law grants OCA access to information related to all areas of a child's life and uniquely positions OCA to identify cross-agency systemic issues, recommend solutions and act as a catalyst for convening responsible entities to address identified problems. Connecticut law also provides broad confidentiality protection for OCA's information, making OCA a safe haven for citizens, state employees and providers who seek to share their concerns.

Yet, as more children are turning to the state for their care and safety, and as we make difficult reductions in available services, Connecticut's only independent oversight agency for children is at great risk for elimination. The Governor's most recent budget proposal eliminates all of the office's 9 staff except the Child Advocate. It diminishes the office's *independence* by transferring all funding for OCA to the Office of the Attorney General, which has responsibility for representing the very state agencies that the Child Advocate must at times investigate.

Among its accomplishments, the Office of the Child Advocate has:

- 1) Investigated conditions at residential facilities where DCF placed children, leading to the closure of unsafe or inappropriate facilities;
- 2) Systematically reviewed the care and placement of special needs children, resulting in inadequate and harmful programs being shut down, and corrective action plans being instituted for others;
- 3) Spearheaded efforts to focus on effective transitions for youth with mental health treatment needs who "age out" of DCF care into the care of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

The Governor also proposes the elimination of the OCA Advisory Board and the Connecticut Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP) whose members all serve without

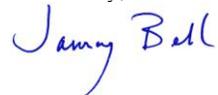
compensation and whose elimination would save the state *nothing*. The losses to the state, if the CFRP is eliminated, would be significant, however. In 2008 alone the CFRP reviewed 146 child fatalities. More than half of those required case follow-up, and 6 were determined to be appropriate for in-depth review/investigation. The CFRP provides important information about health and fatality risks to all Connecticut children, examines the effectiveness of state agencies and inspires advocacy for systems improvement and prevention strategies. While some state agencies conduct their own fatality reviews, only the CFRP, under the authority of the Child Advocate, can assess all information about the child and the services the child received to provide a comprehensive picture of the circumstances of the child's life and death. As part of this work, OCA has worked with the Governor to create statewide anti-bullying, child suicide and teen dating violence prevention initiatives and organized efforts for the Governor's Teen Driving Task Force.

Our children are already feeling the impact of the economic crisis. Many live in families that are struggling to maintain their employment, homes and health care coverage. Some children live in families that were treading water before the recession; their parents now face increased difficulty finding jobs and cuts in services that threaten their family stability. The financial and emotional stress on parents and caregivers place far too many children in our state at risk for exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse and neglect. For those children who receive services from the state, the loss of thousands of state employees through the early retirement program has created a vast void in expertise and supervision due to less experienced case managers and providers across all agencies.

The current budget proposals will also dramatically alter our systems of care for children and their families. Some services and programs will cease to exist and others will experience significant reductions in funding, including voluntary services through the DDS and DCF. The proposed redistribution of responsibility for the care and protection of children across a greater number of state agencies will require diligent oversight and monitoring to ensure that standards of care and access to entitlements for children are maintained.

The independent investigatory and oversight authority provided by the Office of the Child Advocate has been a hallmark of Connecticut government for more than a decade. We urge you, now more than ever, to uphold the value of an autonomous monitor that can shed light on systemic barriers to providing high quality care and protection to our children. Most importantly, we urge you to consider how each budget decision today will impact how Connecticut's children will fare during our current crisis and in the years beyond.

Sincerely,



Jamey Bell
Executive Director, Connecticut Voices for Children

Senator Christopher Dodd
United States Senate

Senator Joseph Lieberman
United States Senate

Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro
United States Representative, Third District of Connecticut

Susan Bysiewicz
Secretary of the State of Connecticut

Denise Nappier
Treasurer of the State of Connecticut

Nancy Wyman
Comptroller of the State of Connecticut

Richard Blumenthal
Attorney General of the State of Connecticut

The Honorable Charles Gill
Connecticut Superior Court

Jeannette DeJesús
Executive Director, Hispanic Health Council

Kevin Kinsella
Vice President, Hartford Hospital

Martha Stone
Executive Director, Center for Children's Advocacy

Jim Horan
Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Human Services

Abby Anderson
Executive Director, Juvenile Justice Alliance

Hal Gibber
Executive Director, FAVOR

Merva Jackson
Executive Director, African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities

Jean Fiorito
Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents

Bob Kocienda
Executive Director, Center for Youth Leadership

Regina Dyton
Program Manager, Aetna Foundation Children's Center

Priscilla Pappadia
Executive Director, Lawyers for Children America, Connecticut

Fay Evans
Director, Star Mentoring

Robin McHaelen
Executive Director, True Colors, Inc.

Michael Schwarzchild, Ph.D.
Connecticut Psychological Association

Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition

Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Connecticut Council of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry