Testimony Regarding
H.B. 5374: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee on the Department of Children and Families as they Relate to Preparation of Youths Aging Out of State Care

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Program Review and Investigations Committee
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Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky, and Distinguished Members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee:

I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Summary

Connecticut Voices for Children supports the recommendations of the Program Review and Investigations Committee (PRI), which, if adopted, will increase and improve transitional supports for youth aging out of Department of Children and Families (DCF) care. However, we are concerned that challenging caseloads impede the ability of the agency to adopt some of the proposed recommendations. We are also troubled by the limited ability of DCF to engage in program evaluation and outcome measurement because of severe data limitations. Finally, we believe this study provides further evidence that it is both ethically and fiscally responsible for Connecticut to allow more young adults to remain in foster care to age 21, as permitted by the federal Fostering Connections Act of 2008. **In order to support the wellbeing of youth and young adults transitioning from foster care, we make the following recommendations:**

- Accountability: Strengthen the reporting requirements of H.B. 5374 by a) requiring DCF to report on progress toward *each* of PRI's 52 recommendations, b) requiring DCF to report on any impediments to progress, and c) requiring that the report be submitted to a larger group of Committees, agencies, and the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) by October 1st of this year.
- Caseload Standards: Take action to reduce DCF's caseload standards, to facilitate the improved social work practices recommended by PRI.
- Data: Support investment necessary to overhaul DCF's case management system, as well as any other internal information systems necessary for the agency to effectively and efficiently monitor and improve its programs using outcome-based measurement.
- Fostering Connections: Fully implement Fostering Connections, and allow all youth who are eligible to remain in or re-enter foster care to age 21.

These steps would help to ensure that DCF and other State agencies can and do act on the recommendations of PRI, which will improve outcomes for youth transitioning from State care.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome your questions.

Accountability

The Committee should strengthen the reporting requirements of H.B. 5374 to better support DCF in rapidly improving services for transitioning youth.

Specifically, DCF should be required to report:

- Progress made toward implementing *each* of the 52 recommendations made by PRI, including all sub-recommendations within these recommendations (e.g., those pertaining to permanency roundtables);[1]
- Outcome measures used to assess progress toward completing each recommendation;
- Any *data* limitations that impede the agency's ability to adopt or assess progress toward completing each recommendation;
- Any *staffing* limitations that impede the agency's ability to adopt or assess progress toward completing each recommendation;
- Any *fiscal* limitations that impede the agency's ability to adopt each recommendation, and a cost estimate of what additional funding would be required to adopt the recommendation;
- Any recommendations which cannot be partly or fully adopted without action or collaboration from other State agencies, and barriers to such action or collaboration;
- Any legislative changes that will be necessary to adopt each recommendation;
- Any evidence based or programmatic reasons that the Agency opposes adoption of any one of PRI's recommendations other than data, staffing, or fiscal limitations;
- Progress made toward adopting *each* component of PRI's recommended "Data Development agenda."

Other relevant state agencies should also be held accountable for youth aging out of care. As discussed in PRI's report, "[transitioning youth] cross several jurisdictions and service delivery systems such as child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and behavioral health… DCF should not be considered alone in its responsibilities."[2] Many of the key outcome measures to be achieved examined in the report – such as stable housing, quality education, decent employment, and excellent health care – fall outside the purview of the Department of Children and Families. Furthermore, as is the case with all State agencies, DCF is limited in its ability to improve practice by fiscal, staffing, and infrastructure constraints that it cannot control. For these reasons, we recommend that DCF's progress report be submitted to:

- The Office of Policy and Management (OPM);
- The Department of Social Services (DSS);
- The Department of Education (SDE);
- The Department of Labor (DOL);
- The Department of Housing (DOH);
- The Children's Committee;
- The Appropriations Committee;
- The Human Services Committee;
- The Education Committee;
- The Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee;

[1] See, "Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care," *Program Review and Investigations*. 2013. Available at http://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/2013_DCF.asp.
[2] *Ibid*.

- The Labor and Public Employees Committee;
- The Housing Committee;
- The Program Review and Investigations Committee.

The broader oversight of this more diverse group of agencies and committees will help to ensure that every agency is doing its part to improve outcomes for youth who transition from foster care.

Finally, in order to give the Department time to submit budget options to OPM that address any of its fiscal, staffing, and infrastructure issues before the start of the 2015 budget session, we urge the committee to require DCF to submit its progress report no later than October 1, 2014. Since DCF has collaborated closely with PRI on its study and is already taking numerous steps to improve adolescent and young adult programming, three months following the end of the current legislative session should give the agency ample time to assess which recommendations it can easily act on and which require additional support from other agencies or the legislature.

Caseload Standards

Reducing social worker caseloads is a prerequisite to adopting PRI's recommendations and improving outcomes for youth aging out of foster care.

Many of the recommendations of the Committee – such as increasing the time that youth spend with social workers, identifying permanent adults to support discharge, helping youth to find affordable housing, or appropriate case planning for the transition to DMHAS – involve improving social work practice. Unfortunately, social workers are limited in their ability to take on these additional responsibilities because of the increasingly complex and time-consuming caseloads that have resulted from DCF's recent reforms.

DCF has instituted a Family Assessment Response program (FAR, formerly Differential Response or DRS), which diverts low-risk allegations of child maltreatment away from foster care to community service providers.[3] This intervention has contributed to a dramatic decline in Connecticut's foster care population, but those youth who remain in foster all have complex needs.[4] Unfortunately, DCF has reduced the number of social workers on staff in proportion to the number of youth exiting care; as a result, social workers still carry the same number of cases, but each case is on average much more demanding than before the institution of FAR.[5] This has left social workers strained. In fact, the most recent *Juan F.* report by DCF's federal court monitor states:

> "Social Workers [*sic*] reluctantly note on a fairly regular basis they are forced to make difficult decisions on how to allocate their case management efforts. They describe their inability to effectively meet all of the daily demands to assist their clients."[6]

We urge the Program Review Committee to partner with Committees on Children, Appropriations, and Human Services, as well as OPM, to review DCF's progress report in conjunction with *Juan F.* court monitor reports and provide additional staffing where necessary to allow for high quality social work practice.

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[3] More information on Connecticut's FAR program is available through DCF's website at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/cwp/view.asp?a=3741&Q=439746.

[4] See, *Juan F.* v. Malloy, Exit Plan Quarterly Report, April 1, 2013 – June 30, 2013, Civil Action No. 2:89 CV 859 (SRU). Available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/publications/pdf/2nd_qtr_report_2013_final_%282%29.pdf.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] *Ibid*.

Data

The General Assembly should support an upgrade of DCF's data system to help DCF more effectively and efficiently monitor and improve its programs using outcome-based measurement.

PRI's report stated "an overall assessment of how DCF is preparing youth who age out of state care is not possible, and is hindered significantly by a lack of quality aggregate information on program activities and measures, and youth outcomes."[7] Furthermore, the agency's inability to engage in program evaluation due to data limitations is a consistent theme reiterated in each section of the report. [8]

This shortcoming is unsurprising, as the agency's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), known as LINK, was created in 1996.[9] In fact, the Agency is already proposing an upgrade of this system because LINK is not intuitive, requires substantial work to perform even basic functions, does not require standardized data entry, is not child based, and is not compatible with mobile applications.[10] Upgrading LINK is an important step toward better enabling DCF to monitor and support the children in its care, and should allow social workers to improve client interaction by reducing time spent on data entry. Furthermore, data management upgrades for child welfare agencies are made more affordable by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which reimburses states for 50% of those expenses.[11] The General Assembly should support this upgrade.

The Committee should encourage improved data sharing between DCF and other relevant state agencies. Even an upgrade to LINK is likely insufficient to address all the data concerns presented in PRI's report, because LINK is a case management system, whereas PRI's report documents DCF's inability to measure outcomes for youth who have already aged out and whose cases are closed. Without such data, it will be impossible for DCF and the legislature to truly evaluate the effectiveness of programming designed to prepare youth in foster care for independence.

DCF's new data sharing agreement with the State Department of Education (SDE) is an important step toward ensuring that youth receive education necessary to prepare them for adulthood. Furthermore, efforts to appropriately implement the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) and to revamp data sharing agreements with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) will also help provide a better understanding of the housing, health, and wellbeing experience of youth formerly in DCF care.

Unfortunately, the likely best source of outcome data about youth transitioning from foster care – HUSKY A (Medicaid) enrollment and claims data – is still unavailable to DCF. In fact, the agency

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[7] *Ibid*.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] See, "SACWIS Replacement Request for Information," *Connecticut Department of Children and Families*. Available at http://www.biznet.ct.gov/SCP_Documents/Bids/31301/SACWIS_Replacement_Request_for_Information_2-6-14.pdf.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] See, Compilation of Social Security Laws, Payments to States; Allotments to States, Sec. 474(a)(3)(C) [42 U.S.C 674] Available at http://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0474.htm.

does not even know if the youth it discharges are insured.[12] Since all young adults who are on Medicaid at the time they age out of foster care remain eligible for HUSKY A until age 26, the HUSKY enrollment and health services utilization of young people exiting foster care can provide DCF with crucial insight into the success of its programming.

We urge the Committee to require DCF to establish a formal data sharing agreement with the Department of Social Services (DSS) regarding aftercare. This agreement should at minimum provide DCF with information on the number and percent of individuals who turn 18 in foster care who are still covered by HUSKY at ages 18 through 26, *and* information on the health services utilization as these youth move into young adulthood..

Fostering Connections

After reviewing DCF's independent cost analysis, the legislature should appropriate necessary funding for DCF to serve all youth eligible for extended foster care and reentry under the Federal Fostering Connections Act.

As discussed extensively in our October 3, 2013 testimony before the PRI Committee, allowing young people who turn 18 in foster care to remain in or return to care until age 21 is an evidence-based strategy for improving educational outcomes, raising earnings, and preventing youth homelessness for young people who age out of foster care.[13] Furthermore, 50% of the costs associated with nearly all young adults in foster care are paid for with federal Title IV-E reimbursement. Unfortunately, DCF offers this opportunity only to the more advantaged youth in its care – those who are prepared to enroll in a college, vocational, or job-training program. Under Fostering Connections, DCF could also receive federal reimbursement for continuing to care for youth who are a) working at least 80 hours per month, or b) have a medical condition that prohibits work or education. The findings presented in PRI's report make it even more apparent that Connecticut should make the legislative changes necessary for DCF to take advantage of this opportunity. (Proposed legislative language is attached.)

Many young people who do not remain in DCF care to pursue higher education transition to DMHAS. This transition was one of the areas identified as most clearly in need of improvement by PRI's report. Only 17% of youth who transitioned from DCF to DMHAS had a case plan in place for the transition.[14] Furthermore, DMHAS asserts that youth transitioning from DCF are poorly prepared to engage with that agency, and often refuse to participate or are discharged from DMHAS for non-compliance.[15] While specific data were not available, the report concludes that these youth likely become homeless.[16] This is particularly unfortunate, as there is no reason these youth who transition to DMHAS need to be discharged from DCF in the first place. Any young person who is DMHAS eligible likely has a medical condition, and would also be eligible for federally reimbursed foster care to age 21. Furthermore, there is nothing in federal law that precludes these youth from receiving DMHAS services if they remain in DCF care; rather, youth could be served by DCF and

[12] See, "Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care," *Program Review and Investigations*. 2013. Available at http://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/2013_DCF.asp.
[13] See, Kenneth Feder, "Testimony Regarding DCF Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. October 2013. Available at http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/100313_pric_dcfagingoutstatecare.pdf.
[14] See, "Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care," *Program Review and Investigations*. 2013. Available at http://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/2013_DCF.asp.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] *Ibid*.

DMHAS simultaneously, with 50% of their housing costs now borne by the federal government instead of the state. This would allow these youth to maintain their relationship with their DCF social worker, and provide more continuity during one of the most challenging transitions of these young peoples' lives.

Furthermore PRI reports that in 2013, 51 young people who had aged out of DCF tried to reenter care but were rejected.[17] DCF will not accept young people who require in-patient treatment or who have a psychiatric condition that precludes educational enrollment – precisely those young people who are most at risk. As is the case with young people transitioned immediately to DMHAS, DCF could take advantage of federal reimbursement through the Fostering Connections Act to allow these young people to reenter care to avert impending homelessness, and help guide them into the care of another agency at 21 if necessary.

Finally, PRI reports that, in 2013, 62 young people were discharged from DCF for failure to comply with the Department's educational requirements. These young people, who are struggling with staying in higher education, will now have their housing taken away as well. If these youth have a medical condition, or a part time job, Fostering Connections would still reimburse DCF for allowing them to remain in care. This would allow these young people to avoid losing their housing, and give the agency time to help guide them back into higher education, gainful employment, or the care of DDS or DMHAS.

PRI's report also shows that DCF has made great strides in helping young adults in its care succeed in a post-secondary education setting. The percent of youth who were still enrolled in or had graduated from school at their time of discharge from DCF more than doubled from 2010 to 2013.[18] Coupled with the Departments continuously declining caseload, this suggests that the number of young people who would be served by further expanding young adult foster care to all youth eligible under Fostering Connections would be very small, likely no more than a few hundred each year. However, for this small but vulnerable cohort of young people without a permanent family to guide them to adulthood, Fostering Connections would be a lifeline.

DCF was required to produce an independent analysis of the cost of fully implementing Fostering Connections in October 2013; however, it has not yet completed this analysis.[19] **We urge the Committee to review DCF's final cost analysis when it is released, and use it to help fully implement Fostering Connections in Connecticut, which will improve outcomes for the most vulnerable young people who age out of DCF care.**

<u>Conclusion</u>

When Connecticut chooses to remove children from their homes to protect them from abuse and neglect, it does so with the implicit promise that the state will find them a better home. When these children are allowed to age out of foster care, the state breaks this promise, and these children are at risk for a host of poor life outcomes. **We urge the committee to continue to hold DCF and all other state agencies accountable for ensuring that young people who must transition to adulthood from foster care do so smoothly. We also urge the committee to work with OPM and the legislature to ensure that these agencies have the support necessary to engage in best practices, which will offer young people aging out of foster care a brighter future.**

[17] *Ibid*.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] *Ibid*.

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