



Improving Care for Children and Youth in Connecticut's Child Welfare System

Equity and Opportunity

Candidate Briefing
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Children in the foster care system are among Connecticut's most vulnerable young citizens. As of June 2014, roughly 4,000 Connecticut children and youth were in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), having been removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect by their parents or guardians.¹ These children are often victims of severe trauma that can disrupt healthy development, and they frequently lack a traditional family structure that can consistently support their growth. While recently there have been a number of encouraging improvements in Connecticut's child welfare system, Connecticut has much work to do to ensure that it meets its responsibilities to the children and youth in its care.

Children develop best in families.

Children naturally form strong bonds with their parents, and removing children from their homes can disrupt this attachment and negatively impact healthy child development. Whenever possible, child welfare policy should strive to keep children in loving families.

Connecticut's new "multiple track" approach to child welfare is a crucial tool for keeping children at home with their families. In cases where DCF believes there may be immediate and serious risk to children, it continues to operate as it has in the past, opening an investigation into the family. However, in cases where the risk is minimal, DCF now places families on an alternative track, "Family Assessment Response"

(FAR), which attempts to strengthen families by connecting them to needed services. Connecticut should continue to devote resources to developing the services needed to support families in the FAR track and keep children with their families and loved ones.

The state's reforms have resulted in far fewer children being served in expensive institutional or group care settings.

Historically, Connecticut has had one of the highest rates of placing young children in congregate care in the nation, and children have languished in group homes despite having no clinical need, simply because no family placement was available. Between January 2011 and June 2014, the share of children living in a congregate setting fell from 30% to 20%.² Connecticut has also decreased reliance on out-of-state placement. In June 2014, there were 338 fewer children residing out-of-state than January 2011, from 364 to 26.³ In addition to ensuring more children grow up in a family setting, this shift away from congregate care has saved Connecticut millions of dollars in payments to residential care centers.

While there have been a number of significant and encouraging improvements in Connecticut's child welfare system, Connecticut has much work to do in meeting the needs of children in its care.

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DCF must be adequately financed to support recent family-centered reforms. After adjusting for inflation, between 2009 and 2015, DCF's budget fell by 20%, from \$995 million to \$800 million. Declining state support for DCF has increased the workload of social workers and prevented the agency from offering sufficient new services to support children in family and community settings. DCF is currently under a federal court order for failing to meet the needs of all children in its care. As DCF's court monitor explains: "The thousands of children being diverted from congregate care need access to timely community-based services and the relatives who have stepped forward in increasing numbers need sufficient support services in order to safely maintain children in the community."⁴ Cuts to DCF's budget must end. At a minimum, the Department must be allowed to reinvest money saved through congregate care reduction in meeting its growing need for staff and an improved array of community-based services.

Youth in DCF care should be empowered to make decisions about their own lives. DCF's youth advisory boards were created to provide youth in the system with the opportunity to advise the Department on policy and practice. Over the past few years, some of the most promising ideas for policy reform have originated with these youth. Youth advisory boards should be given more regular opportunities to engage in discussions with both local and central office staff, including the Commissioner. In addition, DCF should make sure that adolescents are actively and meaningfully involved in their own case planning, as required by federal law.

Allow youth in DCF care the opportunity to develop long-term, stable relationships with relatives, and also with their social workers and other adults in their lives. In addition to family connections, national research and data indicate that forming healthy relationships with social workers, mentors, teachers, siblings, or other adults can be key to achieving long-term stability for youth in state care and custody. The state must ensure that social workers have the time to form healthy relationships with children in its care, and must provide meaningful opportunities for youth in DCF care to build and sustain relationships with other adults.

Youth in DCF care should be provided educational supports in order to ensure their success. For youth in the care or custody of the state, school provides an opportunity to experience normalcy when other facets of their lives are in disarray. However, national and state data indicate that young people in state care are struggling academically because of the trauma they have experienced and the frequent disruptions in their living situation. Connecticut should promote collaboration by DCF, the State Department of Education, and local public schools to ensure children in foster care have the supports they need to attend and learn in school.

DCF needs to continue to improve services for older youth in care. Connecticut falls short of ensuring that many vulnerable older youth who "age out" of foster care get a healthy and secure start in life. Each year, close to 100 youth turn 18 and leave the care of DCF without any formal family relationships.⁵ These youth are far less likely to graduate from high school or be enrolled in college, more likely to experience homelessness or involvement with the criminal justice system, and less likely to be earning a living wage than other youth. By offering more youth the opportunity to remain in care to age 21 and strengthening the array of health, education, job training, and life skills services provided to this population, Connecticut can ensure that these youth experience a more successful transition to adulthood.

To support children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system, Connecticut leaders should:

- Support FAR and other services devoted to keeping children at home and out of group care;
- Develop programs to encourage youth engagement;
- Provide the opportunity for youth to develop long-term and meaningful relationships;
- Provide adequate educational supports to ensure academic success; and
- Support adolescents "aging out" of care in their transition to adulthood.

1. Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan," Quarterly Report January 1, 2014 – March 31, 2014.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. "Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan," Quarterly Report July 1, 2013 – September 30, 2013.
5. "Department of Children and Families Services to Prepare Youth Aging Out of State Care," Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, Connecticut General Assembly, February 2014.