Testimony Regarding 2015 Legislative Priorities
Black and Puerto Rican Caucus
Ellen Shemitz, J.D.
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To the members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus:

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

Underlying our work at Voices for Children is the fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, ability, or geography should be assured of a meaningful opportunity to achieve their full potential.

What would it mean if all children in Connecticut were able to realize their full potential?

- It would mean all children in our State growing up in a safe and stable family with adequate income to meet basic needs.
- It would mean all youth graduating from high school **ready for success** in college or career.
- It would mean employers assured of a **well-trained workforce**.
- It would mean a dramatic **reduction in today's achievement gap**, a sharp **decrease in child poverty**, an increase in median wages, and a healthier economy fueled by a growing middle class with increased demand for products and services.

By making a commitment to **equitable opportunity** for all children, our state could **advance our overall economic standing** at the same time as it advanced quality of life and child and family wellbeing.

Our 2015 legislative priorities are guided by our foundational belief in equity in opportunity for every child in every town in Connecticut. Our priorities have been set with the explicit goal of addressing racial and ethnic disparities in healthy childhood development, educational opportunities, and family success. We encourage the Caucus to consider support for the following priorities as we work together to achieve equity for all children in Connecticut.

First, we must ensure that children of all races and ethnicities have the chance for healthy childhood development. Today in our state Black residents are nearly twice as likely to be uninsured as White residents, and Hispanic residents are nearly three times more likely to be uninsured than White residents.

- Implementation of national health reform has built on the successes of our HUSKY Health program. This year we must **support federal legislation to extend funding of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)** to protect the gains we have made in health care access for children, pregnant women and families.
- On the state level, we must maintain current HUSKY **eligibility and benefits** with consideration of continuous eligibility to prevent gaps in coverage.

- We support health reform initiatives, including the federally funded **State Innovation Model**, to promote access to timely, appropriate, culturally competent, and integrated care for children and families.
- We will seek renewed legislative funding for **independent performance monitoring** of HUSKY**.**
- We support policies that improve access for all children, including our youngest children, to a full continuum of behavioral health and substance abuse services and supports.

Second, every child in Connecticut should have access to high quality public education from cradle to career enabling all of our children to graduate ready for success in school, the workplace and society.

- We support the creation of an **integrated statewide system of early care and education** to increase access to and improve the quality of state-subsidized programs.
    - We support outreach to increase the percentage of low income and minority children in high quality early education. Today only 64% of kindergarteners in lower income towns (DRG I) had a prekindergarten experience versus 96% of all kindergarteners from DRG A towns.
    - We seek amendments to the state's child care subsidy program that will **avoid disincentives to work and ensure compliance with new federal requirements and recommendations**, including establishing an eligibility period of no less than 12 months and allowing families earning up to 85% of the state median income to continue to participate in the program.
    - Given the importance of **attracting and retaining high quality early childhood educators**, we recommend developing a rate structure that will support salaries commensurate with the educational qualifications mandated for teachers in state funded child care settings.
- We also support an educational system that grants each child, regardless of race, education status, or socioeconomic status the right to an equal and high-quality education, one that values keeping students in the classroom where they learn best.
    - Currently, students of color in Connecticut are segregated into under-resourced schools: forthcoming Voices research shows that in Connecticut public schools with unusually large kindergarten classes, four out of every five students is a student of color, and in schools with unusually inexperienced teachers, three out of every four students is a student of color. We support reexamination of our school finance system.
    - We also support an **overall reduction in the use of exclusionary school discipline policies**, with a focus on decreasing the disproportionate impact such policies have on minority populations. Forthcoming Voices research shows that Black and Latino students are arrested, expelled, and suspended from school at disproportionate rates than their white peers – in fact in school year 2013, Black students were 4.7 times more likely to be arrested and Latino students 3.1 times more likely to be arrested than their White peers. To reduce these disparities and increase transparency of this issue, we propose a **uniform definition of "school arrest"** and the mandatory collection of **comprehensive school discipline data** by public school systems.

Third, many children face barriers to success based on family instability, family income, race or ethnicity and/or town resources. Our family economic security work promotes family friendly tax policies and a two-generation approach to family learning and economic attainment.

- All working families should be able to meet their basic needs. Unfortunately, in Connecticut families of color are less likely to attain economic security. In 2013, Black and Latino workers faced double the rate of white unemployment, at 13.4%, 12.1%, and 6.4%, respectively. Connecticut's racial wage gap continues to persist, with Black workers earning a median hourly wage of $15.90 and Hispanic workers earning $14.00 compared to White workers' $22.16.
    - To support working families, we support **restoring the state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** to 30 percent of the federal credi**t.**
    - Connecticut is one of only two states that do not adjust income tax to reflect the cost of raising children. We further support enacting a **tax exemption for dependent family members** targeted at moderate-income families and phasing out at higher incomes.
- Recognizing that not all families are able to offer safe and nurturing homes, we also call for adequate supports and services for children involved in the child welfare system– overwhelmingly youth of color. Developing healthy and permanent relationships is essential for young people in foster care; without secure and stable relationships, youth who grow up in foster care have greater difficulty achieving positive life outcomes.
    - We therefore support legislation that would **help youth establish permanent adult relationships**, prevent youth homelessness, support youth transition to adulthood, and ensure social workers have the time to meet the needs of children in their care.
    - With regard to social work capacity, the state should **conduct a work load study**.

We look forward to partnering with the Caucus this legislative session as we strive together to create a more fair, just, and equitable Connecticut.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or any other staff members at Connecticut Voices for Children with any questions.

Thank you,

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