

**Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Department of Children and Families  
H.B. 5044: An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures  
for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017**

Bianca Rey and Cyd Oppenheimer, J.D.

Appropriations Committee

February 11, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am testifying today 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.

Underlying our work at Voices for Children is the fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, or geography, should be assured of a meaningful opportunity to achieve their full potential. For some children, such meaningful opportunity cannot exist absent state intervention, supports and services. **For those children, Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) bears a unique responsibility.**

**Connecticut Voices for Children opposes the Governor's proposed \$41.9 million (-4.9%) reduction in funding for DCF. Over the period from FY09 to FY16, DCF's appropriation has fallen 20.3% in inflation-adjusted 2015-16 dollars.**

**DCF's budget cuts are part of a troubling and problematic overall disinvestment in Connecticut's young people.** This proposal comes at a challenging fiscal time for the state. An estimated 114,000 Connecticut children currently live in poverty — a record high. We need to invest in schools, health care, and human services in order to ensure that the next generation is prepared to succeed. Yet these are the programs that suffer most when deficits mandate cuts. **Indeed, the Governor's budget proposal would cut funding that affects children and families by almost \$200 million.**

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is entrusted with the responsibility of protecting and promoting the welfare of Connecticut's children and their families. **In times of great economic hardship, it is critical for the state to invest money in DCF, to ensure that the best possible outcomes for children and their families are achieved.**

This testimony will focus on **1)** the need for investment in DCF's child protection services, **2)** the need to preserve support for preventative, diversionary, and rehabilitative programs and services for children and families involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and **3)** the need to preserve transparency and accountability in government.

## I. Need for Greater Investment in Child Protection Services<sup>1</sup>

A series of recent reforms, coupled with a falling foster care population that mirrors a national trend, have helped make the proposed reductions to DCF possible. These reforms include:

- Diverting low risk cases away from foster care and toward community services;
- Relying on relatives to be foster parents whenever possible;
- Placing fewer children in congregate care settings; and
- Placing fewer children out of state.

Reforms such as reducing overreliance on congregate care and “rightsizing” the agency’s caseload by diverting low-risk cases to community providers are best practice and have created cost savings on the one end. **However, the success of these reforms is contingent on sufficient reinvestment of saved funds into services and supports for the unique needs of children and youth who remain in DCF care.**

In particular:

- With low risk cases diverted away from the department, every child who remains in DCF care has complex needs. Social workers require a lower caseload to meet these needs.
- A robust array of community services must be available to meet the needs of families diverted away from the foster care system.
- Relative caregivers often struggle with similar challenges to birth parents, and require specialized support.
- Foster parents will need enhanced support to adequately care for the more complex children placed with them, who might previously have been placed in congregate care.
- Research has shed light on the need for reinvestment in previously poorly understood areas, among them transitional supports and educational supports.

**Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence suggests that the current level of investment in these services and supports is inadequate.** The DCF budget has fallen for several years now, threatening the well-being of our state’s most vulnerable children and families. Successive years of funding cuts, coupled with an increasingly complex caseload, have placed increasing strain on the agency. In fact, DCF remains under federal court supervision to meet the needs of children in its care; the federal court-appointed monitor continues to caution against efforts to save money by reducing congregate care and caseloads absent meaningful investment in frontline staffing and development of services that meet the complex needs of those children remaining in care.<sup>2</sup> The state’s failure to adequately invest money into DCF to improve care quality is jeopardizing the well-being of our state’s most vulnerable children, those to whom we owe a special responsibility.

**To ensure the success of Connecticut’s future, this legislature must prevent cuts to, and re-invest in, DCF’s budget.**

## II. Need to Preserve Preventative, Diversionary, and Rehabilitative Programs

The Governor's proposed budget consolidates preexisting line items into two accounts: "Agency Operations" and "Care and Support for Children" The Agency Operations account is then subject to a 5.75 percent reduction in funds, while the Care and Support for Children account (which includes board and care for children across placement types, funding for no nexus special education students, and individualized family supports) is held constant. We commend the Governor for exempting the key payments consolidated in Care and Support for Children from across-the-board reductions, **but we oppose the 5.75 percent reduction to Agency Operations, which will disproportionately affect preventative, diversionary, and rehabilitative programs.**

**A survey of the line items consolidated into Agency Operations suggests that reductions to the programs contained within will increase costs to the state down the line.** The majority of the line items consolidated into Agency Operations, and therefore subject to reductions, fund preventative, diversionary, and rehabilitative programs for children and families across the state. Programs like substance abuse treatment for children and parents, behavioral health supports, Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services, quality improvement efforts, juvenile justice diversion and reentry programs, and support for domestic violence survivors, work to keep families out of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. These programs and services divert children from these systems, offer preventive assistance to families with children at risk of removal by DCF, and rehabilitate children into their home communities following discharge from DCF placements. By keeping families together whenever possible, these preventive and diversionary programs work to keep youth out of more costly placements in DCF systems. Supportive rehabilitation and reunification programs work to ensure that children already involved in these systems do not need to return to more costly placements later on. **By opening up these programs to possible cuts, the State risks undoing much of the success and savings it has experienced over the past several years.**

**We urge the Committee to preserve the preventative, diversionary, and rehabilitative programs within the Department of Children and Families.**

## III. Need to Maintain Transparency and Accountability in Government

The Governor's proposal would give agency heads greater control over spending. However, this decision reduces transparency and accountability in the budget by obfuscating the impact on individual line items. Under this change, an agency head could cut a program entirely without any legislative oversight, a troubling precedent. **We urge the Committee to reject the proposal to consolidate line items in agency budgets.**

### Conclusion

The Governor's proposal jeopardizes DCF's work to ensure the wellbeing of all youth in state care, who remain among our most vulnerable young people. We recognize the difficult task before you, the legislature, given the ongoing fiscal challenges faced by our state. We very much appreciate your efforts last year to maintain support for essential programs and services for children and families. We urge you to continue to affirm your commitment to the vulnerable children in our care. **We are confident that, with adequate resources and a firm commitment to transparency, we can**

**ensure that all children in Connecticut can grow up in safe and supportive homes and communities.**

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or any other staff members with any questions.

Thank you,

Bianca Rey  
Associate Policy Fellow  
Connecticut Voices for Children  
[brey@ctvoices.org](mailto:brey@ctvoices.org)  
(203) 498-4240 x116

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see Connecticut Voices for Children’s December 2014 report, “Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care,” Edie Joseph and Kenneth Feder. Available at: <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/because-relationships-matter-improving-opportunities-and-outcomes-youth-foster-care>.

<sup>2</sup> See, “Juan F. v. Malloy Exit Plan, Status Report, April 1, 2015 - June 30, 2015 Civil Action No. 2:89 CV 859 (SRU). Available at: [http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/positive\\_outcomes/pdf/status\\_report\\_2015\\_final.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/positive_outcomes/pdf/status_report_2015_final.pdf) .