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TESTIMONY OF ANNE LOUISE BLANCHARD LITIGATION DIRECTOR, CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC.

Good morning, Senator Meyer, Representative McMahon, Senator Harris, Representative Villano, and members of the committees. Thank you for this opportunity to address you regarding the joint investigatory hearing related to the functioning of the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

Over the last 30 years, CLS has represented thousands of low income children and families who are involved with DCF. During that time we have worked with DCF on some cases and litigated against DCF in many other cases, both in individual suits and in class actions. Our most recent significant litigation involving DCF is the W.R. class action, brought to obtain community-based services for mentally ill children and youth. The settlement in that case passed through the legislature in 2007, and will reach its mid-point for implementation at the end of this month.

During the time we have represented children and families who are DCF involved, we have seen a repeated theme regarding the Department--a lack of ability to implement systemic change. DCF has some excellent social workers striving to make a difference in the lives of profoundly abused, neglected, and mentally ill children. All too often, however, the fate of that child depends on whether he or she is fortunate enough to have a 'good' social worker assigned to his case. We have seen no presence of significant systemic oversight to ensure children and youth are served regardless of their particular social worker. We have repeatedly seen DCF staff exhibit a sense of helplessness, acknowledging that a child is in crisis but not having a plan to help that child or even the means of forming a plan.

A good example of this is seen in the situation of a family who contacted us for help in the last few months. Jeremy, a young man from Meriden, has been in DCF's care since he was 8 years old. He has borderline intelligence and disruptive, aggressive, and bizarre behaviors. As he became older, his behavior deteriorated and DCF staff moved him from foster home to foster home until they returned him to his mother last spring with a promise of supportive services. No supportive services were put into place, resulting in Jeremy's mother calling Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services and the police when his behavior endangered other family members. A few weeks ago, after repeated requests for help, Jeremy's mother asked DCF to remove Jeremy from her home. The social worker informed Jeremy's mother that the only place DCF could move Jeremy would be to an adult shelter but that the Department of Mental Health would



Testimony of Anne Louise Blanchard
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hopefully be meeting with him in the future. At the emergency treatment meeting for him the week before last, his team had no plans for him and no ability to triage his case to keep Jeremy, his younger sister, and his mother safe. As of today, fifteen days after that emergency meeting, no supportive services are in place and Jeremy continues to be a risk to himself and his family.

Jeremy's case is not unique. Many other individuals have testified before these committees over the last few years and during the other investigative hearing dates about the failure of DCF to protect or serve abused, neglected and mentally ill children. Connecticut Legal Services alone has represented thousands of children and youth in similar situations, including a severely disabled young man I represented who ended up in the hospital due to dehydration when DCF placed him in a hotel room without the ability to feed or care for himself.

To address the issue of systemic change at DCF, I believe that we need to engage in a fundamental review of DCF's leadership structure. There are many talented and committed professionals working at every level of DCF and most, if not all, have participated in the recent formation of DCF's strategic plan. We have a unique opportunity, as we move forward with the implementation of that strategic plan, to also move forward with a review of DCF's leadership structure. I believe it would be most useful to have a small group of objective and qualified professionals, with national experience regarding the running of child protection agencies, undertake this task, within a limited time frame. We owe the children of Connecticut that much.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address you on this critically important subject.