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Thank you Senator Meyer, Senator Harris, Representative McMahon and Representative Villano and members of the Select Committee on Children and the Human Services Committee for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Karen Foley-Schain. I am the executive director of the Connecticut Children's Trust Fund.

Do you remember the old adage - and ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?

Well, this saying is an adept metaphor for the new thinking we need to put in place to address the tremendous challenges facing the child welfare system in Connecticut.

Under our current system, DCF and other agencies established to support families are stretched beyond their limits attempting to deal with the wide variety and severity of issues facing children and families.

Under our current system, more and more resources and more and more funding are being directed to addressing children and families *after* a crisis has occurred - when it is difficult and costly to intervene.

Under the current system, DCF receives roughly 80,000 reports of child abuse and neglect every year, making the large volume of cases the agency handles a daunting challenge in and of itself.

So, if I could suggest just one step to improve our current child welfare system it would be this: Reduce the number of children and families who come to attention of the Department of Children and Families.

To do this, we must go beyond traditional approaches and employ strategies that give us a better chance of keeping children safe and in their homes.

To do this we must reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect and do more to ensure the positive growth and development of Connecticut's children.

To do this we need approaches and strategies that allow us to reach families *before* a crisis occurs - before a child has been abused or neglected - before a spiral of ever worsening problems has begun.

We can no longer afford to wait until a child has been abused to step in and offer help. Child abuse must and can be prevented.

Recognition of the value of this approach led to a national movement a few years back. The movement was championed by Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd who introduced federal legislation to encourage all 50 states to establish agencies for the sole purpose of preventing child abuse and neglect - to actually keep it from happening.

In response to this legislation, the CT General Assembly created the Children's Trust Fund as a state agency in 1997.

The prevention mission of the Children's Trust Fund is distinct from the prevention mission of the State Department of Children and Families (DCF).

The Department's prevention mission, as defined by Sec. 17a-3 of the CGS, is to provide preventive services for children with mental health problems, who abuse substances, are delinquent, abused, neglected or uncared for, including children committed to it by any court or who are voluntarily under the supervision of the commissioner.

DCF is primarily focused on children in need of protection, those who require mental health or substance abuse services, and those who come to the attention of the juvenile services system.

In contrast to this, the primary focus of the Children's Trust Fund is to reach children and families *before* they become involved with DCF - to prevent child abuse and neglect and other problems that would require the involvement of the child protection, mental health or juvenile justice systems.

The prevention mission of the Children's Trust Fund, as defined by Sec. 17a-50 of the CGS, is to fund community-based programs aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect and that provide resources for families. These programs reach families who are *not* involved in the DCF system. The programs help parents to be responsive to their children and ensure their positive growth and development.

There are areas where the efforts of DCF and the Trust Fund can come together - I will speak to one in just a moment - but there is a clear distinction in the work of the two agencies.

The mission of the Trust Fund has led us to finding the most effective means of assisting and strengthening families in order to prevent child abuse and neglect - to actually keep it from happening.

The Trust Fund works with hospitals, schools, clinic, community service organizations and others to recognize the potential for abuse and neglect, to work with families at risk, and build safe environments for children.

And while I would like to tell you about the many areas in which the Children's Trust Fund is working, I will highlight just two approaches that can help more families and more children have a better chance at a promising future - the Nurturing Families Network and a "differential response" to child protective services.

### **The Nurturing Families Network (NFN)**

Chief among the efforts of the Children's Trust Fund has been the development of *Nurturing Families Network*. The program focuses on providing intensive home visiting services to high-risk, vulnerable families at a critical time in their lives - when their first child is born.

Why home visiting?

The Trust Fund focuses on home visiting because this approach has been shown to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect, to improve parent child relationships, to help adults make important gains in their education and employment and to help children perform better in school and fare much better in life.

This is in stark contrast to what we might expect for children living in high-risk, poor and distressed households. Children living in households with incomes of less than \$25,000 are 25 times more likely to be abused, and 44 times more likely to be neglected than other children.

Children living in poverty - even in the absence of a substantiated case of abuse or neglect - are typically at greater risk for developmental, behavioral and health issues and more likely to become involved with the departments of Social Services, Corrections and Mental Health as adults.

The Nurturing Families Network screens new parents for risk either prenatally or while they are still in the hospital. The program provides services to families giving birth at all 29 birthing hospitals out of 42 locations across the state with multiple sites operating in the cities of Hartford and New Haven.

While the Nurturing Families Network has made strides to reach more families in more communities it is still only reaching a small percentage of all families who would benefit from its services.

In Connecticut there are roughly 10,000 children born into poor families each year with one or more risk factors. Of these 10,000 about 5,000 children are born to first time parents. The Nurturing Families Network is only reaching 1,500 of these at risk families.

Ensuring access to all new families at risk would be a sound investment of the state's dollars. Studies have shown that investments in home visiting programs pay real dividends - \$6.00 in return for every \$1.00 invested.

In Connecticut, careful evaluation of the impact of the Trust Fund's Nurturing Families Network demonstrates that this analysis is correct.

Our studies show that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the high-risk families who participate in the Nurturing Families Network is well below that of high-risk families not participating in this type of program - 4.6 % in 2007 compared to 20%.

This means that the Nurturing Families Network is keeping children and families out of the DCF child protective services system. A special report and other information on the program are attached to my testimony.

### **Differential Response System (DRS)**

The second approach I would like to tell you about is the differential response system (DRS) for child protective service cases.

Under this approach DCF would conduct extensive investigations into serious reports of child abuse and neglect, as it does now, while referring lower risk cases to community-based services.

The goal is to help families address the problem in a meaningful way and to prevent them from coming back into the child welfare system with a more serious report.

Under this approach community service providers and neighborhood residents work together to support families that come to the attention of DCF - but because their cases carry a low risk for injury to a child they do require the traditional investigative response.

Let me give you an example of how differential response works:

A physician has a sense that something is amiss with a new mother and is concerned for the safety of her baby. He refers the matter to the DCF. An investigation concludes there is no evidence of abuse or neglect so the case is closed. The mother is on her own - and an opportunity to offer real help is missed. Unfortunately in these situations, there are often problems simmering under the surface that bring a family back to DCF - this time with a more serious report of abuse or neglect.

A differential response would refer this mother to a community-based organization that would be prepared to help her - despite the lack of a substantiated case of abuse or neglect. The community-based provider would work with the family and offer supportive services. This approach enables the provider, DCF and the community to work together to 'wrap' services and supports around the mother in a non-threatening and preventative way.

Twenty six states have adopted a differential response system. Studies on these efforts have found that actions to assist families increased and fewer families came back through the DCF child protection system. Meanwhile, DRS allows the child protective services agency to focus more of its resources on serious cases.

If Connecticut were to embrace this approach, the Children's Trust Fund and DCF could work closely together to offer real help to families at the first sign of a problem. We understand that DCF is considering this approach and we would encourage your support.

In closing:

We understand that we can never prevent all child abuse and neglect. There will always be children and families that rely on the Department of Children and Families to play a crucial role in their lives.

But with home visiting, more families can stay out of the child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice systems. And a differential response to child protective services can help more families get the help they need to address their issues and prevent future problems.

By employing these strategies, we have a better chance of keeping more children safe and in their homes and reduce the overwhelming caseload facing DCF.

Adopting these strategies requires a commitment to change and new approaches.

We owe it to the children and families of Connecticut – and to the taxpayers – to take this path.

Thank you.