Testimony
Joint Investigative Hearing on the Department of Children and Families
December 5, 2008

Good morning Senator Harris, Representative Villano, Senator Meyers, Representative McMahon, members of the Human Services and Select Committee on Children, my name is Mary Ellen Hass, I am the Vice President of Child Welfare and Adoption for Family & Children's Agency in Norwalk, CT. Today I am here representing the CT Council on Family Service Agencies, a statewide network of independent, non-profit, family service agencies that deliver services to over 100,000 families, making this one of the largest associations of non-governmental providers of services to CT's children, youth, adults and their families.

Today I am here to talk to you about the Department of Children and Families as it relates to the re-procurement process currently underway. I strongly support the general intent of the competitive re-procurement of health and human services as defined in Public Act 07-195, to provide a framework for the state to award contracts based on a standardized and transparent process that allows for the selection of the best qualified providers to provide the highest quality services in a cost efficient and highly accountable manner. **However, the implementation of the plan is fraught with issues that threaten the quality and continuity of services for our clients, all of whom are the most vulnerable children and families in CT.**

For example, the Family Reunification Program was redesigned earlier this year and renamed Reconnecting Families Program. With the department under intense scrutiny to ensure permanency for children in out of home placements, Reconnecting Families provides a safe, therapeutic avenue for children to be reunified with their parents through intensive home based work. Yet, the department reduced the amount available to continue the program and downgraded the credentialing requirements for the workers from Masters Degrees to Bachelors Degrees.

The timeline for this rebidding was also an issue – all statewide Family Reunification grants expired on December 31, 2007 yet contractors were not notified of their awards until December 21st. If a current provider of the service was not awarded a new contract that left only ten days to close a program down and refer families to a new provider. Conversely, a new provider would have only ten days to hire staff and implement the new program. It is important to note that receiving an award under this system grants the contractor only "the right to negotiate a contract" with the state. Following the notification on December 21st, the actual contract was not negotiated and executed until March of 2008. In the absence of an executed contract some private providers discontinued their services.

My agency is the contracted provider for Reconnecting Families services in Norwalk and Stamford. During the three months that it took to negotiate the contract, we did not interrupt our services however, we were approached on a number of occasions to take referrals from another area as the provider in that community was not able to accept referrals until the their contract was negotiated. This example clearly demonstrates the effect that this process has on both quality and continuity of service.

Other issues that negatively impact the rebidding process at this time are

- The selection process and training of review teams is not standardized and uniform for all state agencies.
- There is currently no appeal process to the decisions made concerning the outcome of the procurement process.

In the Department's Service Re-Procurement Plan approved in July 2008, there are 66 such programs scheduled for rebidding. In this document DCF themselves state "Over 66 re-procurements are planned for the next three years. Although many may have occurred regardless of the plan, the volume of work will increase by at least 30%. Additional staff or reassignment of duties may be required."

This committee has heard the testimony of the Commissioner and the Child Advocate regarding the plan for exiting the consent degree and the terms for the stipulated agreement in the Juan F class action. As you have heard, the Department is working tirelessly to reduce the time children spend in safe homes and residential facilities. The recent plan calls for an additional 350 foster homes to be licensed with 100 of these homes coming from the private providers of Therapeutic Foster Care. I applaud and agree with the departments' efforts to reduce the time children spend in congregate care. Every child deserves a family. Yet with the urgency to create more families through foster care, the Department decided to re-design Therapeutic Foster Care by issuing an RFI this past fall to be followed by an RFP in the early winter. Given the capacity issues they cited in their Re-Procurement Plan that demonstrate the need for increased capacity for the department to adequately and successfully rebid contracts coupled with the issues regarding contract negotiation once an award has been given, rebidding Therapeutic Foster Care at this time could prove to be disruptive and devastating for children in foster care.

Furthermore, the current economic crisis faced by the State of Connecticut presents additional problems to the rebidding process. Many state agencies have already expressed the need for increased resources and personnel to meet the objectives of the competitive procurement process. However, we are now experiencing a time when both state agencies and nonprofit providers must devote their time, energy and resources to the challenges presented by this unprecedented financial crisis. To require state agencies or nonprofit providers to divert scarce resources to implement the competitive procurement process during a time of significant financial uncertainty and upheaval is an invitation for disaster.

Taking more time to further develop the competitive procurement process will increase the likelihood that high quality services with strong and positive service outcomes will be secured in a transparent and standardized fashion.

Therefore, I urge you to consider postponing the current re-procurement until which time the Department has the resources to do so without disrupting the lives of the children for whom trauma and loss has been the hallmark of their young lives.

In closing I want to highlight the great respect and admiration Family and Children's Agency has for those we work with in the Norwalk/Stamford Area Office of DCF. Our mutual respect and collective collaboration is the finest example of a public/private partnership. Two months ago, when the Commissioner released her plan for reorganization of the Department, which included the elimination of the Area Directors positions, she solicited and considered the feedback from the provider community. As a result she has recently announced her decision to keep the Area Directors positions in the new regional system. I want to thank her for thoughtfully listening to our collective voices and I look forward to our continued work with Department to ensure the well being of the children in our community.

Thank you

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