

**Testimony Regarding the Department of Children and Families  
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**Testimony from:** Molly Cole, Appointed Member  
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Good morning. My name is Molly Cole and I have served as an appointed member of the State Advisory Council to DCF for the past year. I wish to make several comments on the agency.

1. **Dispute/Complaint resolution:** The SAC is very concerned about this issue. As you are probably aware, the agency has an Ombudsman's Office, which families are told to access if there are disputes, complaints and concerns in the area offices. Very recently, the Department moved this office under Quality Improvement, with the commendable goal of using complaint information to drive quality. However, we have heard from parents and providers that this office has little clout within local offices and therefore little impact on driving quality. This is anecdotal information, because the data collected only refers to numbers of calls and types of issues, but captures no outcomes, either immediate or longitudinal on these issues. Further, we know that families still feel concern for retaliation when they complain. Let me be clear here that there are many great staff and workers, both in Central Office and out in the area offices. However, there is a culture within DCF that is defensive, and staff that are unable or unwilling to investigate and take action in an impartial manner. And while it is easy to understand why staff becomes defensive when working in an agency so frequently under scrutiny, it is a major barrier to shaping the quality of services in the agency. This brings me to my second point.
2. **The State Advisory Council** is just that—advisory. I am aware that, during the Legislative Program Review hearings last year, many of you heard testimony about the council. Just to remind you – the council was established in statute to make program recommendations, review and advise the commissioner on the annual budget, educate the community at large and issue reports as it deems necessary. The commissioner is an ex officio member of the council with no vote. Now, if any of you have ever sat on advisory councils, you understand the implicit limitation of such a body. However, this council is even more limited, because members of the council, who are providers under DCF contracts, are very hesitant to speak out on many of the

issues that need to be addressed. They have implied on more than one occasion that they fear that criticism of the agency could jeopardize their own contracts. And family members who may be receiving DCF services are not willing to speak out either. The culture of DCF—defensive and resistant to a lot of external input—is simply too threatening and the fear of retaliation is too great. I would suggest that this council would be more effective as a legislatively appointed oversight council, reporting to a legislative body and having greater authority and more protection for its members as a public entity. In this partnership with the agency and the legislature, consumers and providers could more effectively offer input in a constructive and action driven agenda that is not merely advisory to the agency.

3. My third point relates to the **DCF Training Academy**. The training academy has an impressive, extensive curriculum designed to train quality staff at all levels. However, the academy uses staff from the agency, including staff from the field as faculty, on a rotating basis. That means that this culture will not change, and the opportunity for input that is external to the agency is very limited. I would recommend that you consider moving the academy to an entity outside the agency. Please understand that my comments are in no way related to the quality of the training academy staff. I just believe the agency needs external input to move forward, and this may be one way to begin that process
4. Lastly, I want to address issues in **accountability and reporting**. I stated earlier that there were no outcome measures collected in data from the Ombudsman's Office. Data on outcomes is critical to shaping the quality of service, yet data seems to drive little of the decisions made by the agency. I reviewed the last submission of the mental health block grant, and was dismayed that decisions were made on how to spend even that small sum of money without concern for outcomes and results.

In closing, I want to thank you for taking the time to explore the strengths and needs of this agency. DCF is a complex and large agency with many knowledgeable and good people. But I truly believe it needs an influx of outside input to grow and improve. I want to urge you to continue with these deliberations, even as much of the legislative action this year will focus on the budget. This issue is critical to many families and children in our state and deserves our continued vigilance.

Thank you.