

Good morning Senator Meyer, Senator Harris, Representative Villano, Representative McMahon, and members of the Human Services and Select Committee on Children. My name is Barbara Sheldon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. I am pleased that you have taken the time to hold the 3 important hearings regarding DCF. And I truly hope that because of these tough economic times, both committees will follow through with some substantial recommendations regarding DCF and not put this important discussion aside due to the economy.

I would like to focus on a four areas of concern:

### *State Advisory Council*

I have been a member of the SAC for just less than a year, however in that time I have come to realize that DCF does not behave as though we have an advisory role to them. We have no authority or respect. For the most part it's merely a dog and pony show for which I'm losing interest. DCF schedules their people to present, but not so we can advise. It feels more like they are checking off a box. We aren't given information prior to decisions so that we can advise, but rather after it's in place. When DCF did their new strategic plan, we weren't invited to participate, to give input prior; however, we were shown it afterwards; again to check off the box.

#### *Recommendation:*

1. SAC should take on the role and responsibilities of an oversight body set up much like the Behavioral Health Oversight Council

### *Accountability*

DCF needs accountability at all levels and with their contracting agencies and organizations. Agencies can not be allowed to continue in contracts with little to no accountability. It seems that if an agency states that they have increased the numbers served, that is the mark of success. There is no regard as to how the number was obtained, is that number accurate, was the child or family helped, did the child or family feel they were in a better place and how was that evaluated. We need to look at results based accountability and not sheer volume as the basis. Also, the person at DCF responsible for overseeing the contract, should not be the same person evaluating the success of the contract as there could conceivably be a conflict of interest. The worker gets intimately involved and then overlooks glaring issues.

#### *Recommendations:*

1. Contracts evaluated by an outside party – ie the SAC as an oversight body since DCF has proven they do not evaluate appropriately
2. There needs to be results based accountability
3. The data collection system needs to be maintained and analyzed
4. Families need to be heard

### *Training Academy*

The culture at DCF needs a complete overhaul if they want to do right by children and families. DCF employees need to be appropriately trained at all levels. When the culture is dysfunctional if not abusive, training from within won't affect change, rather it will perpetuate itself.

#### *Recommendation:*

1. Remove the Training Academy from DCF and have the training done from outside.

### *Regional Offices*

It is well known that there are regional offices that are considered to be "notorious." I have even been told this by several DCF workers. The attitude is nothing can be done to them. In a recent State Advisory Council meeting I addressed Commissioner Hamilton with this concern and relayed two recent stories regarding families who sought

DCF's help through voluntary services from one of the "notorious" offices. The first was forced to give up her rights to her 7 year old daughter in order for her daughter to receive mental health help leaving the mother isolated, depressed and as she puts it "I'm a shell of myself. I am a mother without a child and what kind of a mother gives up her child when I haven't done anything wrong, but have a child with an illness." The other family was threatened, but due to an advocate intervening, their child was accepted into care coordination and DCF was forced to back off. And I'd like to mention that care coordination is a service that the DCF voluntary services worker should have offered the family, however did not, but rather threatened the family that their child would be removed from their home. Basically Commissioner Hamilton dismissed my concerns rather than insisting to look into them. That spoke volumes to me!

Also to note, about a year and a half ago, a single mother of two boys called me crying for help. She too had turned to this DCF office for mental health help for her 17 year old boy. DCF's response is truly horrifying! The worker threatened her with "if you bring your 17 year old son home from the hospital, we will take your 10 year old son for his safety. If you do not bring your 17 year old son home, then we will have you up on charges for abandonment and then you will lose both of your children." This mother had no right answer, nor should she have been put in that position when she had done nothing wrong except say my family needs help. I know this to be a true and credible account because when another advocate and I attended a meeting at the DCF office, the mother recounted this statement as we wanted it on record. When the worker agreed to stating such, the advocate stated "you're threatening this mother." The worker's response was "no, just stating the facts ma'am, just stating the facts." We were shocked and horrified! I then continued with the Deputy Commissioner wanted this family helped, and he stated he was listening to his Behavioral Health Program Director's direction. This same Director had been on a conference call with the Deputy Commissioner and myself the day before and was adamant that she did not take direction from her and that she took direction from Karl Kemper. I was floored that she would address a Deputy Commissioner with such disrespect and total disregard and then keep her job.

*Recommendations:*

1. Regional Offices should not be allowed to operate as Dictatorships without regard for best practices.
2. DCF Behavioral Health Program Directors need to be required to have a behavioral health background.
3. Voluntary Services workers need to be trained on what "voluntary services" means and what programs and services are available.
4. Voluntary Services workers should not have come over from Protective Services because that is a different mindset.
5. There should be a true grievance process for families. The Ombudsman's Office should be removed from DCF because every complaint that I have sent over to the Ombudsman's Office has always ruled for DCF.

Again thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify as families in Connecticut need your immediate attention regarding this agency. No more studying, no more talking, action is needed. I greatly appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

*Barbara C Sheldon*

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