

Testimony of Jamey Bell
before the Human Services Committee and the Select Committee on Children
re
Informational Hearing Concerning the Department of Children and Families
December 5, 2008

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony about the Department of Children and Families. I am the Executive Director of CT Voices for Children, whose mission is to promote the well-being of all of Connecticut's young people and their families by advocating for strategic public investments and wise public policies. Before this fall, I was a legal aid lawyer for 26 years, during which I represented low-income families in health, education, and child protections matters, including abused and neglected children and other family members involved with DCF.

I. CT Voices for Children supports the maintenance of the Department of Children and Families as a single agency

Voices strongly believes that "breaking up" the DCF would be detrimental to children and families in Connecticut. Fundamentally, such a move would constitute a change in the way that children who interact with the agency are viewed and responded to. Housing all child protective and welfare services under one roof reflects and confirms the commitment to take a holistic look at a child and family, and meet all their different needs in as integrated a manner as possible. If there are separate agencies with separate mandates and services the message will inevitably be that the door through which a child enters really does matter-- which is not the desired message nor the case-- and that different areas of a child's life can be separated and treated compartmentally.

"Compartmentalizing" DCF's functions in this way also runs counter to forward-thinking and progressive trends across other related systems which have moved toward viewing and responding to children's needs holistically. Now, the concept of "children's health care" automatically encompasses the whole child—proactive and preventive medical, dental, mental health for well children; timely and appropriate treatment for identified health problems; and early, coordinated, and family-directed and integrated care for children with special health care needs. Similarly, education systems' response to children's needs try to address the child's educational needs comprehensively, providing health-related, family, nutritional and other services and resources in order to maximize children's ability to take full advantage of their

educational opportunities. For DCF to begin to dis-integrate its array of services and responses to families in need would be a backward step.

Other states' experiences with breaking up child protection agencies has been that two to three years' worth of progress are lost as staff and resources shift into new roles. This time loss is unacceptable, especially in this current period of economic turmoil and possible consequent increased family stressors.

However, intensive scrutiny must be given to whether the current DCF systems and personnel can meet the needs of families going forward. Careful monitoring of the implementation, or lack thereof, of the July 2008 "Stipulation Regarding Outcome Measures 3 and 15" in the Juan F. v. Rell litigation, with its December 31, 2008 deadlines will provide critical and relevant insight into this question. If failure to meet these commitments occurs, an outside assessment of DCF management's capability to carry out its mission should be made. This could be along the lines of an independently contracted short-term management working group, similar to the one assembled by the Governor to review the Department of Transportation, to create a management assessment and strategy plan.

II. CT Voices for Children urges the vigorous pursuit of system-wide efforts to maintain children in or return children to *homes* rather than institutional or group care

Too many children in DCF care are in institutional or group placements, often to the detriment of the real best interests of the child, and always at greater expense to the state. CT Voices and other policy analysts and advocates are exploring a "money follows the child" initiative to reduce the placement of foster children and youth in residential treatment programs, group homes and shelters by making some or all of the funds that DCF currently is spending for institutional care available to a foster family willing to bring that child/youth into their home for the purchase of the services that family needs to maintain the child in their home (e.g., emergency mobile psychiatric services, respite care). This initiative would be similar to DSS' initiative in long-term care to reduce the reliance on nursing homes by allowing seniors to remain in their homes with the help of community-based, in-home services.

I. CT Voices for Children urges firm commitment and specific plan to foster school stability for DCF-involved children and youth

Children who are placed in foster care, and who are moved from one foster placement to another, commonly change schools as well as their placement. This causes further disruptions in their young lives, severing ties to friends, teachers, and school activities. Research shows that each school transition also costs 3-6 months of academic progress. The protections of the federal McKinney-Vento Act (that assure that homeless children can attend their "home school" regardless of the location of the homeless shelter in which they live) do not apply to all foster children although they also are, technically, "home"-less. This discrepancy leaves some of the

state's children with this academic support and allows other out-of-home youth in foster care to slip through the cracks. During this past legislative session Voices assisted in drafting a bill based on a successful model implemented by Oregon that requires their child protective services department to pay for transportation from the foster placement to the school of origin. This legislation was passed unanimously through both the Select Committee on Children and the Education Committee, received a small appropriation in the Appropriations Committee, and then subsequently died when no changes were made to the budget.

Recently passed federal legislation, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* (H.R. 6893), requires that state child welfare agencies improve educational stability for children in foster care by coordinating with local education agencies to ensure that children remain in the school they are enrolled in at the time of placement into foster care, unless that would not be in the child's best interests. The law also increases the amount of federal funding that may be used to cover education-related transportation costs for children in foster care.

Voices advocates for complementary state legislation assuring foster children the right to attend their "home school" when they are removed from their homes or moved from one foster placement to another. If a party to the foster care proceeding believes the child should transfer schools, the judicial system should determine, using the best interests of the child standard, whether the child should be transported back to his/her "home school" or whether a transfer to a new school is more appropriate. DCF as the child's statutory parent, rather than the school district or the state Department of Education, would pay for the cost of transportation.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.