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Testimony in Support of SB 321: An Act Concerning an Infant Toddler Education and Development Program,

Good Afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and Members of the Children's Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Fraser; I am a policy analyst for the Connecticut Association for Human Services. I am here today in support of SB 321: **An Act Concerning an Infant Toddler Education and Development Program.**

With the advancement of brain science and recent research about growth and development, we know that the earliest years are critically important for the development of language, cognition and secure attachments. This bill seeks to create a program for parents to better respond to the needs of their infants and toddlers. Any program that is designed to support parents and ensure healthy and thriving infants and toddlers is critical to the wellbeing of families and should be widely available.

However, to create such a program and for it to have real impact, we need to recognize that children do not live outside the context of family environment. We respectfully submit that programs should be developed in the context of these questions:

- At present what is preventing parents from responding to the needs of their infants and toddlers?
- How can we support our youngest children by addressing family need?
- What successful family centered programs are already available and might be brought to scale?

We know that lack of education, unstable employment, insufficient housing, the limited availability of quality infant and toddler care and lack of transportation can lead to a home environment of stress and instability. Often parents and their children live from day to day, from crisis to crisis. This type of continuing stress can lead to health problems and depression. For too many families in poverty, this has become a generational cycle. Certainly it is important to provide programs that support parenting. However, for long term results towards providing stable and secure environments for children, we need to address the barriers to family security and provide for the family as a unit.

For some of the most in need families, a two generation approach to family success might be a path up and out of difficult circumstances. Two generation family economic success programs provide for the early learning needs of the children and the educational/ training needs of their parents, offering a dual learning environment. A strong model includes a parenting component, allowing time for parents to learn valuable information about child development and early literacy, discuss common childrearing

questions and share with one another. In addition, families in crisis are directed to community supports that can be of assistance.

For other families, a different approach may be warranted. As program development moves forward we respectfully recommend that planners take into consideration the many successful “parenting and family support” programs already available across the state. Many of these programs are not yet widely available but could easily be expanded and brought to scale. Existing family programs to consider for expansion include:

Even Start: Whole family programs such as CT Even Start address the educational needs of parents through adult education, provide quality infant / toddler care for their children, and offer parenting education opportunities and time for parents to spend with children in a secure environment. In addition, programs such as this one provide opportunity for parents to connect with each other and to their communities. Although there are thousands of young parents lacking high school education, there are only three of these successful programs left in the state.

Family Resource Centers: Family Resource Centers provide access, within a community, to a broad continuum of early childhood and family support services which foster the optimal development of children and families.

Home Visiting Programs: Child First, Nurturing Families Network and the New Haven Mom’s Program provide opportunities for family support, access to mental health and help to facilitate access to other needed community services. Early Head Start home visiting programs provide a comprehensive family approach to early growth and development.

Circle of Security Parenting: COS provides a clear and non- judgmental path to healthy parent /child attachment. The program is highly valued among early care professionals for its effective approach and can be easily incorporated into many different venues.

Finally, access to high quality infant and toddler care should not be forgotten. This includes home based care and programs such as **All Our Kin**. In addition to providing appropriate and nurturing learning environments for children, high quality programs provide valuable and timely information for parents. However, accessible and affordable infant and toddler care is difficult to find. We need to make sure that all children of working parents have the capability to place their infants and toddlers in nurturing and developmentally appropriate environments.

In closing, SB 321 recognizes the importance of parents in the lives of their children and raises the important issues of childhood health, safety and security. CAHS supports SB 321 moving forward and being further explored.