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Testimony to the Appropriations Committee –Education Subcommittee Opposition to HB 5044

2/16/16 Elizabeth Fraser, Connecticut Association for Human Services

Good morning Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleishmann, and members of the Appropriations Education Subcommittee. I am Liz Fraser, a Policy Analyst at the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide non-profit agency that works to reduce poverty and promote economic success for children and families through policy and program work.

I am speaking today to in opposition to the Governor's midterm budget adjustment proposal, specifically to the block grant format and to the cuts and program elimination proposed for the Office of Early Childhood. (OEC)

We are in a challenging budget environment and we know difficult decisions will need to be made to produce a balanced budget. However, the Governor's proposed budget shifts the responsibility and options for making for crucial spending decisions from a transparent, public process at the General Assembly, toward one that is opaque, leaving the bulk of the decision making with the Executive Branch.

Instead of the traditional budget breakdown for proposed reductions, with specific explanations of what line items are facing cuts, the Governor's proposal offers an agency-wide spending level, and gives the authority to each agency head to decide where to cut. By not being explicit, his proposal curbs our public process. The public is left to advocate for a myriad of successful and necessary services for children and families, without the benefit of clarity about which programs are targeted for cuts. Elected legislators, who are knowledgeable in the needs of their communities and become versed in the services and programs of their particular committees, would have reduced voice.

We are very concerned about where and how these hidden cuts would occur and the potential impact on some of the less understood programs. In addition, we are in opposition to the elimination of several valuable programs including:

A Century of Strengthening Children, Families, and Communities

Community Plans: To clarify, the word “plans” is misleading. This funding supports a statewide network of local early learning collaboratives that work to promote the health and well-being of our youngest children.

Based on research and local community need, local collaboratives have designed and implemented strategies to address barriers to early learning success. Community initiatives have promoted early literacy, reduced summer learning loss, addressed the causes of chronic absenteeism, and have provided needed information to decrease childhood obesity. All initiatives are data driven and have measurable outcomes. Often communities are able to use their collective partnerships to leverage other philanthropic funding.

Community collaboratives are a reminder that system-building does not only happen horizontally through state agencies. For a system to be truly effective, it must have vertical layers that reach down into community. Those that are at the community level can best glean what is needed, discover where gaps in services exist, and then provide this information to the statewide agencies that have the capacity to provide needed supports and direction. We need system development at both the state and local levels. The elimination of this partnership would have serious implications for both individual communities and our statewide system building strategies.

Even Start:

CAHS also opposes the proposed elimination of Connecticut Even Start, a program designed to strengthen and support parents without a high school degree or who need to learn English. It is one of the most underrated programs Connecticut has available.

Two generation learning models, such as Connecticut Even Start, address the challenges faced by these very fragile families. Parents are placed in appropriate high school completion, GED, or ESL programs, while their infants and toddlers are placed in a high quality early learning environment. Program guidelines specify that programs must address and be accountable for parent outcomes, child outcomes and family/parenting outcomes. Independent evaluations have shown strong results.

The three programs remaining from the original federal grant provide education for both parent and child **and** provide a portal to the supports and community programs needed for family stabilization. A parenting education component ensures that parents have access to information and tools needed to become a partner in their child’s education.

Unlike many programs, two generation programs have both short term and long term impact. In the short term, we are educating parents toward their educational goals and meaningful employment. Children receive a strong start in quality programs and those with suspected

developmental delays are identified early. In the long term, families are more stable, children are transitioned into quality early education programs and most important, parents take an active role in their child's educational progress. As we know, a parent's involvement in their child's education is directly correlated to the long-term success of the child.

Each year Connecticut has thousands of babies born to parents that have not yet completed high school. These are some of the most in need families in the state. Future options for these parents and children are more limited. Even Start provides hope and results for families. It should be replicated rather than eliminated.

Care 4 Kids:

Although Care 4 Kids is not in danger of being eliminated, we are concerned that without additional funds, the positive changes to the federal re-authorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), may impact access to this workforce program.

We are encouraged by the new CCDBG federal re-authorization requirements which will be implemented in July, 2016. Positive changes influence regulations regarding:

- **Unemployed Parents-** A three month period will be allowed for newly unemployed parents to find employment before they lose their Care 4 Kids eligibility. Parents will have the time and capacity to search for employment while children remain undisrupted in their early care environment. This just makes sense.
- **Financial Cliffs** –Families will remain eligible for a full year and will be allowed to receive salary increases of up to 85% of SMI, before losing eligibility. This will greatly reduce the “cliff effect.” Families will benefit from increased stability in the family budget. Children will benefit from consistency in placement. Centers will benefit from having stability in their early care population and in the decreased paperwork.

However, we should recognize that the changes that will take place though re-authorization will have cost implications that may impact future access to the program. More families will remain eligible for longer periods of time, yet new families will continue to become eligible. With only a finite amount of available funding, it may be necessary to close the program to new applications from working, low income families. (The exception would be for those protected classes including TANF families and potentially homeless families.) Because of this potential lack of affordable childcare, parents could find it difficult to seek or accept employment opportunities. The unintended consequences of program closure could lead to negative impact on the growth of our fragile state economy.

In this economic climate, we need to be doing everything possible to help our neediest families work and contribute to the Connecticut economy.

Early Care Wages:

Implicit in the Governor's proposed budget is that the potential cuts, or even flat funding to early childhood programs, do not consider the looming issue of early care provider wages. Centers are finding it more and more difficult to hire the caliber of early care teacher required to receive state funding. Many are leaving early childhood centers for public schools where they can earn a wage commensurate with their education and experience, a living wage. If we are to continue our high standards in early care and education and provide quality experiences for our children, then we will need to more intentionally consider the dilemma of provider wages.

We understand that the budget situation is challenging, and that Connecticut has to take some tough decisions. The only way to take those decisions and introduce real, needed changes to the state budget is through an open, accountable and transparent budget process, not by delegating authority to the executive branch.