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Testimony before the Appropriations Committee—Education Subcommittee

Emmanuel Adero, Policy Analyst, Connecticut Association for Human Services, February 21, 2017

Good Afternoon Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Education Subcommittee.

My name is Emmanuel Adero, and I am a Policy Analyst for the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide nonprofit agency that works to reduce poverty and promote economic success for children and families through both policy and program work.

I am speaking today in opposition to the Governor's proposed FY 2018-'19 budget, specifically:

- The reduction of funding to the Care 4 Kids program and the closing of priority groups until 2019
- The shifting of Birth to Three funding to DSS
- The elimination of Healthy Start, Community Plans for Early Childhood, Even Start, and Help Me Grow.

In addition, we are opposed to the consolidation of line-item programs in the State Department of Education budget.

While we understand that the current budget environment creates a great deal of difficulty in producing a balanced budget, CAHS supports a fully funded Office of Early Childhood, and a braided system of early childhood program initiatives. The funding adjustments in the proposed budget, which call for the reduced funding of Care 4 Kids and the reallocation of Birth to Three funding to DSS, disrupts what should be a well-integrated service delivery system.

Care 4 Kids:

A lack of reliable childcare is among the primary obstacles to employment among low-income parents and families. Care 4 Kids provides quality childcare to such families, and is a valuable asset to low-income working parents and their children, a disproportionately high number of whom are children of color.

Due to the budget shortfall at the beginning of the fiscal year, Care 4 Kids was forced to close the program to 3 tiers of families by January of this year. The impact of this closing will be pronounced, and

will be borne by the children, their families, the business community, and the centers themselves. Care 4 Kids is the only child care support available for half of the towns in the state, and a decrease in funding and will leave scores of families without coverage. Additionally, with three tiers closed to new applications and with children currently in the system gradually aging out, Care 4 Kids will cease to serve children under 5 by September of 2018. This is a significant deviation from the program's initial purpose.

The closure of the programs will also serve as a disruption to both the working families in need of care and their employers. Parents periodically or chronically withdrawing from the workplace when they cannot secure reliable child care will negatively impact productivity, shifting the collateral damage to the business community. Naturally, the closure of programs will also result in the loss of jobs in the child care industry, creating instability in families of employees who until the closure had a greater measure of economic security. Given how broadly the impact of these disruptions will be felt, we believe that in the interests of children, families, and businesses, Care 4 Kids should be fully funded within the OEC, and not closed until 2019.

Birth to Three:

CAHS believes that the movement of the non-Medicaid portion of Birth to Three to DSS, effectively removing the program from the OEC, will similarly prove disruptive to the families it serves, and providers we affiliate with want the program to remain within what was intended to be a cohesive system of early childhood services. An educational support program serving the families of the youngest children, Birth to Three, we believe, functions best as part of a larger, integrated service delivery system.

The Medicaid portion of Birth to Three was moved to DSS in 2015, and the argument has been made that with the new Medicaid reimbursement requirements, Birth to Three's being fully administered through DSS would be in the best interests of families in the program who receive Medicaid benefits. However, 40% of the children received Birth to Three services do not receive Husky.

Fully removing Birth to Three from what should be an integrated service delivery system will cause additional disruption to this network of services, decreasing the efficiency with which they work together to serve families and children. While we laud the efforts to streamline the administration of Birth to Three under a single agency, we believe that the OEC is a better home for the program than DSS.

We maintain that a braided system dedicated to early care and education is optimal for the utility of the programs and the benefit of the children and families they serve, and we strongly urge that this system be given enough time to meet its goals, to continue to flourish, and to be evaluated as a cohesive system. We believe that the establishment of a vehicle by which to transfer funds to OEC programs will prove more practical in the long term, than splitting up the programs in order to fund them independently.

Elimination of Programs

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 many 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 3 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.

Community Plans:

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 at the community level can best glean what is needed, discover where gaps in services exist, and then can 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.

Help Me Grow:

It is absolutely critical that parents—regardless of educational background—have the resources necessary to understand developmental milestones and their child's progress. Help Me Grow, coordinated through the United Way 211 Info Line, allows Connecticut parents identify behavioral or developmental issues as their children progress, and is instrumental in referring them to Birth to Three

and other services. In the interests of child development and timely referral and integration with Birth to Three, it is critical that Help Me Grow remain funded.

Education:

We are concerned by the lack of transparency in the proposed reallocation of numerous support services grants into the new Student Support Services SID. We are in a challenging economic environment and we know that difficult decisions will be necessary to produce a balanced budget. However, the Governor’s proposed budget shifts the responsibility and options for making crucial spending decisions from a transparent, public process of the General Assembly, toward one that is opaque, and potentially leaves the bulk of the decision making with the Executive Branch.

We are concerned that the consolidation of these programs—combined with a 50% cut—will make it difficult to ensure that each program retains a sufficient level of funding. This could, for example, allow agencies to make cuts from one or two programs within the bundle, rather than equally across each line item. Hypothetically, this could leave those programs with smaller allocations at risk for very large cuts or at risk for elimination. Additionally, if a budget mitigation plan becomes necessary, the potential would exist for the executive branch to just eliminate “low hanging fruit”, including programs that might not be as widely understood as others, but are important to a system of serving the citizens of Connecticut.