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Overview of Children's Issues

Select Committee on Children Testimony

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Senator Meyer, Representative McMahon and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mary Glassman and I am the Director of Legislative Affairs at Connecticut Voices for Children. As you probably know, Voices is a research-based public education and advocacy nonprofit that works to promote the well being of Connecticut's children, youth and families.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity today to talk to you about how we can better invest in Connecticut's future – our children.

While there are many important issues facing you as legislators this session, we believe there are several key initiatives, which would have an immediate impact on improving the lives of children and families in our state.

Priority issues this committee and the General Assembly must address this Session include improvements in affordable and accessible health care, early childhood education, legal representation in child protection proceedings, juvenile jurisdiction, child-care subsidies and tax and budget issues such as the education cost sharing funds and the repair of the state's spending cap.

Please allow me to briefly review each issue.

**Improve Cost-Effective Health Care for Connecticut's Most Vulnerable Children and Families**

There cannot be a conversation about improving health care coverage in Connecticut without a discussion of the Husky program, Connecticut health insurance program for low-income children and families. There are about 202,000 children and 87,000 parents

in Husky A and an additional 16,000 children in Husky B. An estimated 68,000 children under 18 – which represents 8.5 percent of all children in Connecticut - were uninsured in 2005. Recent policy and procedural changes have led to drops in enrollment and while some of these policies have been repealed or reversed, there is much to be done to ensure that all children have access to health care.

There are steps Connecticut can take to reduce the number of uninsured children.

1. Restore funding for community-based outreach and application assistance – This will reach families unaware or confused about eligibility for coverage or renewal information. In particular, Connecticut can target outreach to the Hispanic community, which has higher uninsured rates than other demographic groups.
2. Align income eligibility for parents and children – This will increase child enrollment by offering family coverage;
3. Restore continuous eligibility – This will ensure that fluctuations in income – common among low income families – do not jeopardize access to care for their children
4. Avoid imposing additional cost-sharing on parents or children – This will encourage continuity of enrollment or use of health services
5. Cover all pregnant women to 300 percent of the federal poverty level – This will ensure that babies who will be eligible for coverage in Husky A or B get proper medical attention before birth.

#### Improve Early Childhood Education

Across Connecticut, a gap in academic achievement persists between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. Despite a decade of discussion about this crisis, little progress has been made. We at CT Voices for Children support the Early Childhood Education Cabinet's plan "Ready by 5 & Fine by 9" to take groundbreaking steps toward once and for all addressing the preparation gap. We also encourage stronger innovation in moving away from patching broken programs to moving toward true system of reform.

In particular, we would urge this committee to focus on legislation that ensures universal access to preschool for all children. In 1998, the General Assembly passed and provided funding for the School Readiness Program. But despite the success of investing in high quality preschool, approximately 8,700 children eligible for School Readiness are not enrolled because of a lack of funding; and an additional 18,000 Connecticut children outside of these eligible school districts do not have access to preschool. At the rate of growth the program has experienced since 2000 (less than 300 spaces per year), Connecticut would not achieve its goal of universal access to preschool by the year 2096. We must do better.

#### Improve the Quality of Legal Representation in Child Protection Proceedings

We support the Child Protection Attorney initiatives to provide quality legal representation to children and indigent legal parties in child protection matters before the Juvenile Courts.

At a recent Commission on Child Protection conference, there was a shocking presentation by a young man who had been in foster care since he was 12 and only learned he had an attorney when he was informed at 18 he no longer qualified for one. There is clearly a need for training of child protection attorneys, oversight and increased compensation in child protection cases.

### Support Juvenile Jurisdiction Changes

We support raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18. Scientific research has confirmed our common sense understanding that children who are 16 and 17 years old are simply different from adults. Brain imaging studies show that the brains of teenagers do not react to dangerous situations in the same way as the brains of older adults; making responsible decisions takes 16 and 17 year olds longer and they may be more likely to make mistakes in identifying dangerous situations. In a variety of ways, Connecticut already recognizes the fact that 16 and 17 year olds are not fully adults: a 16 or 17 year old Connecticut youth cannot vote, serve on a jury, get a marriage license on his/her own, or enter a casino. Automatically treating 16 and 17 year olds as adults in criminal court is inconsistent with other Connecticut laws and out of step with most states. In fact, Connecticut is one of only three states that automatically treat all 16 and 17 year olds as adults in criminal court.

The Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning and Implementation Committee (which was established in statute last session and charged with planning for the increase in jurisdictional age of the juvenile court) is finding ways to use existing court space and other existing facilities, so the transition from an upper age of 16 to an upper age of 18 is not likely to be as expensive as was suggested in past years. Connecticut can get in step with these other states and make our criminal justice system more consistent with our understanding of adulthood by passing a bill this session to increase the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to age 18.

### Support Care4Kids:

We believe this committee should support legislation that will support low-income working families trying to afford the high cost of childcare. Over the past several years, Connecticut has significantly reduced state funding for the Care4kids program – leaving thousands of families without needed child-care subsidy and putting these children in harms way. We urge the committee to look at two policy changes to help low income working families:

1. Mandate an automatic adjustment every two years in the Care4 Kids reimbursement rate to licensed providers, commensurate with the results of the federally mandated biennial market rate survey.

2. Mandate reimbursement rates to home based providers be increased commensurate with increases in the state minimum wage.

#### Repair the Spending Cap:

Why should the Select Committee on Children be interested in addressing Connecticut's spending cap? Because although the spending cap was intended to limit state spending growth, the effect of the cap prevents Connecticut's ability to accept federal funds and to invest in Connecticut's future such as in education, transportation and affordable housing.

The cap acts as a disincentive for Connecticut to claim all federal funds which the state is entitled and has led to budgeting gimmicks – such as borrowing not only for capital expenses but also for ongoing operating expenses such as salaries and revenue intercepts to fund programs outside the cap. Connecticut now ranks 4<sup>th</sup> highest in state debt as a share of personal income and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in per capita state debt. An increase in debt crowds out other public investment.

The spending cap should be repaired so that it works in the best interests of the state and provides transparency to the budgeting process.

Two ideas to repair the cap:

1. Define the budget base as allowable rather than actual spending in a year;
2. Use a two year average measure of personal income growth rather than a lagged five year average
3. Include first year of federal funds in the base

The future of Connecticut depends on the actions we take today to ensure that children in Connecticut have a chance to grow up healthy, safe and receive proper pre-K through adult education and training in order to enter a workforce that can compete in a global economy. While there will always be competing interests for dwindling state dollars, we urge this committee to support legislation that invest in Connecticut's best resource – its children.