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Improving Care for Children and Youth in Connecticut's Child Welfare System

**Candidate Briefing
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Children in the foster care system are among Connecticut's most vulnerable young citizens. As of June 2012, roughly 4,400 Connecticut children and youth were in the custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and removed from their homes because they had been abused or neglected by their parents. Many other children and families are receiving services from DCF to avert out-of-home placements. While there have been a number of significant and encouraging improvements in Connecticut's child welfare system since Commissioner Joette Katz joined the Department in January 2011, Connecticut has much work to do to ensure that it meets its responsibilities to the children and youth in its care.

Connecticut's new "multiple track" approach to child welfare is a crucial tool for keeping children at home with their families. DCF's Differential Response System (DRS), introduced in March, diverts less serious cases reported to the Department from an adversarial, forensic-style investigation track to a "family assessment response" track devoted to strengthening families by connecting them to needed services. Connecticut should continue to devote resources to developing the services needed to support families in the family assessment track and keep children with their families and loved ones.

DCF needs to continue its crucial reforms designed to ensure that children -- especially children under 12 -- grow up in families, rather than in expensive institutional and congregate (group) care. Historically, Connecticut has had one of

the highest rates of use of congregate care for young children in the nation. Within the past year and a half, Connecticut has halved the number of children aged 12 and under in congregate care, going from 201 children in January 2011 to 87 children in June 2012. Connecticut has also decreased the overall percentage of children in congregate care from 29.8% to 25.6% of children in out-of-home care. In order for the shift to family-based care to be successful, the Department must reinvest a substantial portion of the savings from reducing congregate care in community-based services that will support children returning to the community. Without these needed supports, there is increased risk that the family placements will fail, resulting in poorer outcomes and increased costs as children and youth are returned to institutions.

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To reduce overreliance on congregate care, DCF must do a better job of attracting new foster parents and, perhaps even more significantly, retaining the foster parents it already has. The primary factor underlying DCF's overreliance on congregate care is a shortage of licensed foster homes. While DCF has devoted great resources for the recruitment of new foster families, it has failed to meet its benchmark for a net increase in foster homes. DCF has increased emphasis on the placement

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of children with relatives, leading to an increase from 15.3% of children in care placed with relatives in January 2011 to 19.9% in June 2012. This will help fill some of the shortage. However, DCF needs to improve the foster parent experience in order to help it make up for the additional shortfall. In addition to reducing unnecessary overreliance on congregate care, increasing the number of foster homes will help keep more sibling groups placed together, will ensure that more children can be close to their home communities, and may help increase rates of adoption from DCF care.

Youth in DCF care should be empowered to make decisions about their own lives, both on the system and individual case levels. DCF's youth advisory boards were created to provide youth in the system with the opportunity to advise the Department on policy and practice. Over the past few years, some of the most promising ideas for policy reform have originated with these youth. These youth advisory boards should be given regular opportunities to engage in discussions with both local and central office staff, including the Commissioner. DCF should also reinstate its annual conference for adolescents, which provided information, resources, and inspiration to youth in care. Furthermore, DCF should implement its plan to develop a web portal for youth which would provide comprehensive, practical information in an accessible format. In addition, DCF should make sure that adolescents are actively and meaningfully involved in their own case planning, as required by federal law. Finally, youth in group homes and residential care facilities should have a voice in decisions that affect group living to improve their experiences and to reduce incidents of running away, which poses grave risks to teens.

DCF must help the children and youth in its care maintain strong relationships with their brothers and sisters. When children are taken into DCF custody, their connections to their families and communities are often traumatically interrupted. For many children and youth in the foster care system, ongoing relationships with their siblings are a vital source of emotional support as they go through difficult times. Ideally, all children in out-of-home care would be placed together with their brothers and sisters unless such placement is not in their best interest. In situations where placing all members of a sibling group together is impossible, DCF should provide for frequent (at least weekly) visitation to help sustain sibling bonds. A newly passed law (Public Act

12-71) which takes effect in 2014, will mandate weekly visitation for separated siblings who reside in-state and within 50 miles of each other, except in cases where such visitation is not in each sibling's best interest.

Connecticut must improve the quality of legal representation provided to children and youth in DCF care to ensure that their interests are adequately represented in the Juvenile Court.

While Connecticut made some meaningful reforms over the past decade that had the potential to improve the system of legal representation, it risks backsliding on this issue. Unfortunately, because of budgetary pressures, the state made several changes in 2011 to attorney oversight and compensation that have the potential to diminish the quality of representation provided. Connecticut must devote more resources to ensure high-quality legal representation for children and youth in DCF care.

DCF needs to continue to improve services for older youth in the system. Connecticut falls short of ensuring that many vulnerable older youth who "age out" of foster care get a healthy and secure start in life. Each year, approximately 90 youth turn 18 and leave the care of DCF entirely on their own, without any formal family relationships. Without a family to support their transition to adulthood, youth aging out of care are far less likely to graduate from high school or be enrolled in college, more likely to experience homelessness or involvement with the criminal justice system, and less likely to be earning a living wage than other youth. By strengthening the array of services provided to this population, the state can help ensure that these youth experience a successful transition to adulthood.

To support children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system, Connecticut leaders should:

- Support Differential Response and other services devoted to keeping children at home;
- Develop programs to encourage youth engagement;
- Continue to devote resources towards serving more children in families, rather than in congregate care;
- Improve recruitment and retention of foster families;
- Support sibling relationships and other lifelong family ties for children in care;
- Protect the rights of children in care by providing them with adequate legal representation; and
- Support adolescents "aging out" of care in their tradition to adulthood.