



House Bill No. 6659
AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING
APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR
February 24, 2023

Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:

As Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, I am submitting this testimony to urge you to increase the budget of the Office of the Public Defender. (OCPD) CCA is the largest children's rights legal organization in New England. The Center, which is affiliated with the University of Connecticut School of Law, provides holistic representation for underserved children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation, education and training, and systemic advocacy.

Our office not only represents children in the child welfare system but we also have a contract with OCPD and provide pre-service and in-service training to all new child welfare attorneys who undertake this legal representation . I also was one of the original attorneys who filed the Juan F. class action case against DCF, which case is now closed, and so have familiarity with that system and the crucial need for quality lawyering to protect the rights of the most vulnerable children and families.

We believe the increase is necessary for the following 4 urgent reasons:

First, child welfare proceedings are some of the MOST important in the state. The future of children and whether they remain or not with their biological family are the most serious decisions a judge in this state must make. Without adequate legal representation, the checks and balances of our judicial system is in jeopardy. This state must prioritize the needs of OCPD to appropriately provide legal representation because in the absence of this, the voice of children and youth becomes significantly diminished.

Second, OCPD has not been able to retain an adequate number of attorneys to handle these important cases because of the compensation structure. This has a tremendous detrimental effect upon the children. Every time an attorney quits the practice, someone else has to take over and the children are left to tell their story "once again" and try to gain the trust of the person who is their voice..."once again."

Third, the failure to provide adequate representation disproportionately affects youth and families of color who are subject to abuse and neglect petitions. These families are predominantly without financial means to hire their own attorneys and must rely on the state system for appointment of counsel.

Lastly, child welfare practice is a specialty unto itself. No one wants to go to a malpractice attorney who has no or little expertise in the field. No one would hire a personal injury lawyer who was not familiar with how the cases should be handled. Similarly, attorneys need to be trained and retrained to know the appropriate and necessary services, rules of the court, case law. This comes with experience and years on the job..... in a practice where the lives of children are on the line. We must respect the work of these attorneys and recognize the significance that this role demands.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Martha Stone, J.D.
Executive Director
Center for Children's Advocacy