

Connecticut Commission on
Women, Children *and* Seniors



**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee of the General Assembly
Submitted by Joan Barere, Senior Policy Analyst for Children and Families
Commission on Women, Children and Seniors
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Re: Reductions, eliminations, and reallocations of funding to early childhood and parenting programs, in particular:

- **Care 4 Kids**
- **Parent Trust**

Senator Formica, and Senator Osten, and Representative Walker, Vice Chairs, Ranking Member and all other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of the Commission on Women, Children and Seniors.

The Commission on Women, Children and Seniors (CWCS) is a non-partisan arm of the Connecticut General Assembly. As staff to the legislature, our statutory mandate calls for us, among other things, to “gather and maintain...information regarding women, children and the family and elderly persons in the state that can be used to better understand the status, condition *and contributions* of such groups” (Sec. 132 (5), emphasis supplied). To fulfill that obligation, CWCS undertakes develop a knowledge base on and to promote policies and programs benefiting children and families. We also undertake to promote those policies and programs involving our children and families that benefit the state at large.

That distinction is reflected in our mission statement: CWCS researches policies “that are meant to remove economic and academic obstacles that prevent children and their families from reaching their full potential.” We do that not only because of the potential improvements in health and wellbeing of the individual children and families receiving direct benefits, but because the outcomes also favor the health and wellbeing of our economy, and consequently benefit the state and all of its citizens.

Under statute, CWCS also serves as staff to the Interagency Working Group of the Two-Generational Initiative of the State of Connecticut. While Two-Gen is not a topic on today’s agenda, it has been mentioned in testimony earlier today, and for good reason. Two-Gen programs and policies have the potential to lift families from poverty and promote their continued success by serving the parent and child at once, and in a coordinated and efficient way. Two-Gen is meant to maximize positive outcomes while minimizing program cost, to do more with less by keeping the family—and the intended outcome—firmly in the forefront of service delivery. In these challenging economic times, Two-Gen just makes sense, and we include it as a lens when viewing programs and policies that affect children and families.

Based upon those foundations, CWCS advocates maximizing within our resources all services available to promote the early childhood programming that science has confirmed are necessary to

give all Connecticut's children the best chance to reach their potential. Our children are our most vulnerable citizens, but also our most important, because they are the workforce of our future.

With regard to Care 4 Kids programming:

While we recognize there are no easy answers as to how to maintain and sustain the Care 4 Kids Program, which is clearly an object of bipartisan support, CWCS offers some words of caution:

- Care 4 Kids is a perfect example of a Two-Gen program, in that it provides for both workforce success and school success, preparing infants and toddlers for pre-school and school while allowing their parents to get and retain employment. We pay for one program, but we get two outcomes.
- The two key elements of infrastructure supporting working families in Connecticut, at all income levels, are transportation and child care. Our economic wellbeing, the ability of our employers to secure and retain employees, are dependent upon both. And while we are used to talking about transportation as an industry and seeing it as such, for some reason it is more difficult to view the child care industry *as an industry*. While we are used to discussing investments in the transportation infrastructure for maintenance and repair, we do not always see the funds being paid to child care providers—who operate on a very thin profit margin—as investments. CWCS encourages the legislature to think “investment,” rather than “cost, and to recognize when we discuss the budget before us that the choices on the Care 4 Kids line item, and on others that result in revenue to our network of licensed child care providers, that these reductions are *disinvestments*.
- Following on the investment theme, the State has recognized that child development requires investment. And the legislature has acted in favor of making those investments by creating the Office of Early Childhood, and by providing for the funding of the construction of child care facilities throughout the state through the issuance of development bonds under the authority of the Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority, CHEFA. Many of those bonds remain outstanding, secured by the child care facilities they built, occupied by the child care providers who yearly see reductions in revenue through the reduction of access to Care 4 Kids for priority groups that previously in far greater numbers relied upon Care 4 Kids to make child care affordable on a working family's budget. Those facilities were designated by statute to remain child care facilities, by this legislature, based upon a far seeing policy favoring broader availability of child care. If the operators cannot remain in business, however, those facilities may close. Many are already at risk, and CWCS asks this Committee to consider that the state will remain liable for the debt service, and may receive limited if any benefits in compensation.
- The child care that children receive in licensed facilities is designed to promote the preparation of infants and toddlers to progress smoothly to pre-kindergarten programs, and to kindergarten, and thereafter through our school systems, from cradle to career. And science has shown that by investing in the early child development that is offered through programs such as Care 4 Kids, we are promoting the success of the children served. CWCS counsels that we want to be very careful not to take further steps backward here. Connecticut is the 7th oldest state in the nation, and our skilled workers are at retirement age, and will be for the next two decades. By 2038, when the baby boomer generation has retired completely, and the children born today are of age to take their place, it would be wise for the state to be sure they will be ready for the challenge.

With regard to the Parent Trust:

The Parent Trust Fund is the first family civics initiative focused on training parents in leadership skills to improve the health, safety, and learning outcomes of children. Established by the Connecticut General Assembly in 2001, the State Department of Education administers the Parent Trust Fund through the State Education and Resource Center (SERC). Parent involvement programs supported by the Parent Trust Fund include the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) created by the Commission on Women, Children and Seniors, the University of Connecticut-sponsored People Empowering People (PEP), The Center for School Change's Parents Supporting Educational Excellence (PSEE), and ASPIRA's APEX, among others.

The proposal to reallocate several support service grants (including the Parent Trust, primary mental health, family resource centers and after school programs) into one competitive grant at reduced funding will decrease opportunities for parent leadership and the positive outcomes for children which arise from them.

Research shows that parent involvement has a significant positive impact on child outcomes. The Trust prepares parents to work with school, community and state leaders to improve health, safety and learning outcomes for all children. More than 1,100 parents and their children are served annually. Each of these training graduates leaves better prepared to advocate for their children, volunteer in their community, serve on non-profit boards, lead parent-teacher associations or run for public office. By mentoring and empowering parents, the Trust's programs create ripple effects on family, local and state levels. Parent leadership strengthens families and communities by creating positive change in the systems, policies and programs designed to serve and support children.

An evaluation of PLTI revealed the following outcomes for parents:

- 99% are better able to access information to navigate their community
- 81% gained knowledge and skills in being an agent of change
- 73% engaged in advocacy work and 52% in community organizing
- 15,000+ hours of community service are completed by graduates annually and alumni have helped in:
 - The establishment of an accessible, affordable swim program for children with special needs
 - Launching an advocacy and mentorship organization serving at-risk families
 - Securing funding for neighborhood improvements to local parks and pedestrian safety
 - Serving on school, district, regional or state committees and boards

Thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary today on these issues.