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Governor
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STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Connecticut Office of
Early Childhood

David Wilkinson
Commissioner

**Testimony of David Wilkinson, Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Appropriations Committee
Re: H.B. 5035 - An Act Adjusting the State Budget For The
Biennium Ending June 30, 2019
Thursday, February 22, 2018**

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Rep. Ziobron and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. I am David Wilkinson, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). I am here today to testify before this committee concerning the Governor's FY19 proposed budget for the agency.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood advances a family-centered and results-driven approach to support young children and their families. OEC integrates early childhood services by providing a unified vision and institutional structure to support increased coordination between programs. Through our core programs, we support access to high-quality early care and education, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk young families, health and safety assurances, and early intervention and parenting supports to help families address developmental challenges.

After years of reductions across all state agencies to meet budgetary constraints, the Governor's budget largely maintains the state's investment in the high-quality, evidence-based early childhood services administered by the Office of Early Childhood. As with all state agencies, the lapses from FY18 are annualized in FY19. As we deploy limited resources in service of Connecticut's youngest residents, we do so with a relentless eye toward achieving results. In advancing our mission to achieve great outcomes for children and families, we deploy both the budget and the authorities with which you have entrusted us according to three principles:

- First, deliver on our core programs with excellence.
- Second, advance our family first, two-generational mission through greater cross-silo collaboration and new partnerships.
- Third, improve our cost-effectiveness and accountability for outcomes through a new, performance-driven infrastructure of better data systems, evidence-building, customer feedback, and results-driven contracting.

By responsibly deploying our budget according to these three principles, the OEC pursues its mission with a laser-focus to what matters most: results for children and families.

We thank the Legislature for supporting the Birth to Three program in the budget passed in November. The allocation of additional funding addresses the long-standing annual deficiency in

Phone: (860) 500-4412 · Fax: (860) 326-0554
450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 301
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
www.ct.gov/oec

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this critical program supporting young child age birth to three who have developmental delays. The Governor's budget proposal, too, supports this critical program with this level of funding.

The Early Care and Education and Care 4 Kids line item may look confusing due to a realignment of federal funds to streamline reporting, but the impact is exactly what this body has proposed. The following change has taken place: Formerly, federal SSBG funds were transferred from DSS to cover about 50% of the Child Day Care (CDC) payments that are paid out of the Early Care & Education line item. Instead, in FY19 \$26,012,019 of additional CCDF federal funds will go to Care 4 Kids and that same amount of state funds will be shifted from that line item to the Early Care and Education line item to keep that program whole.

I want to thank the Governor and this legislative body for your commitment to funding the critical early childhood investments that OEC administers.

Our big priority for the year ahead: Better serving infants and toddlers

Looking ahead, we are committed to continue to advance on our mission – achieving great results for children and families – through the principles of delivering with excellence, collaboration, and performance. One critically important policy priority will be a core focus of this year: better serving infants and toddlers through our ECE system.

An in-depth ECE systems assessment has been confirmed by our recent stakeholder engagement sessions, consistently highlighting difficulties families have in finding child care for infants and toddlers – our youngest and most fragile children. We know that 80% of a child's brain architecture is formed in the first three years of life, and that the conditions in which that occurs has life-long impacts. Safe, high quality early care and education is a critical factor in a young child's healthy social emotional development. This year, we will be working to the greatest extent possible to create increased access to affordable infant and toddler care.

In closing, I want to thank the Appropriations Committee for its long-standing investment in our youngest children and their families. Having a dedicated early child agency not only positions Connecticut as a national leader, but more importantly, is succeeding as it takes significant steps to achieve measurably better results for children and families. We are doing so with a distinct emphasis on collaboration, accountability and cost-effectiveness. OEC does all of this with an abiding belief that the families we serve and the taxpayers who fund us deserve our smartest efforts and our best work.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and for sharing our passion for achieving great results for children, for families, and for Connecticut's future. My written testimony contains more information on our accomplishments and achievements for you to read at your convenience. I would be happy to take any questions.

OEC's Notable Achievements

The legislature created this agency in law four years ago with a mandate to better serve children and families in Connecticut. You called on us to be a different kind of state agency. Bringing together early childhood programs spread across five different agencies, you asked us to turn a fragmented system into a streamlined, more efficient agency that works better for families. You asked that our efforts be evidence-based, recognizing the overwhelming evidence that smart investments in the early years of life present our best, most cost-effective, chance to disrupt the relentless cycle of poverty. Understanding that it is hard to get great results for young children without addressing the conditions and circumstances of parents and caregivers, you asked us to be family-centered and work across silos. You asked us to be data-driven, using analytics to continually improve on our results with better, more effective approaches. You asked us to be accountable for outcomes for families, seeing that the old model of measuring success by numbers served is a low bar when it comes to serving families in need and making the best use of taxpayer dollars.

Four years later, I am happy to report that we have taken meaningful steps towards the goals you set out for us and are on a path fulfill this vision.

OEC also acts as a collaborative partner with other state agencies, helping to knit together the complementary investments the state makes to support families with young children. Through this integrated approach, OEC delivers better coordinated, more cost-effective services that yield measurable results for Connecticut's children and families.

Nationally, our agency's structure and family focus is a model that other states on both sides of the political spectrum are working to emulate. Your leadership in creating this agency bolsters Connecticut's reputation as one of the most forward-thinking states when it comes to early childhood. Our distinctive approach of connecting and elevating early childhood programming into a cabinet-level agency has enabled us to be particularly successful in attracting competitive federal and philanthropic resources into the state. Since 2014, the Office of Early Childhood has brought in over \$50 million in new federal and philanthropic funds and numerous technical assistance grants. Since we were created in legislation, OEC has won the two largest federal competitive early childhood awards (one in ECE, one in home visiting), only three other states can claim that distinction.

Delivering on our core programs with excellence

Early Care and Education

Early Care and Education (ECE) represents the largest portion of our budget – approximately \$289 million in state and federal funds. It encompasses seven different ECE programs, including Care 4 Kids (\$130M), School Readiness (\$93.7M), Child Day Care Centers (\$34M), State Head Start supplement (\$5M), Smart Start (\$3.25M), Preschool Development Grant (\$12M), Early Head Start Child Care Partnership (\$1.1M) and Child Care Quality Enhancement (\$6.8M). Through these programs, over the course of a year, we serve approximately 66,000 children with high-quality care and education, while giving parents the ability to work, contributing to our economy with piece of mind that their children are in safe, supportive care.

Beyond state and federally funded programs, we license and ensure safety for all licensed child care providers, including 1,409 centers and group homes, and 2,010 family child care homes who collectively serve approximately 107,000 children. This year we are taking meaningful steps to streamline and improve the system in a way that reduces unnecessary burden on providers, further enhances quality and better meets family need – all informed by a broad, transparent, and responsive stakeholder process.

Care 4 Kids, our largest source of ECE support, has been subject to federal mandates that have increased quality and cost of the program, forcing OEC to close the program to most new applicants in the first half of FY16 to remain within available appropriations. This created substantial burden on families, many of whom were forced to choose between not working and placing their children in unsafe care. My top priority as a new commissioner was to re-open the program as soon as we had budget certainty. Within a few days of the FY18 budget passing, the OEC reopened Care 4 Kids enrollment to all families on the wait list. Since reopening in November, we have enrolled 1,996 new households (over 2,890 children), enabling parents to work and secure child care. We have cleared the wait list and are now enrolling families as they apply.

The Legislature has continually recognized the importance of Care 4 Kids as critical for the care of our youngest residents, as a lifeline for parents, and as a backbone to our economy. Just as the Legislature increased funding for the Care 4 Kids program in the FY18 budget you passed in November, the Governor's budget follows your lead and does the same. I want to thank the Legislature and the Governor for the strong commitment to this vital child care subsidy program for low-income working families. Care 4 Kids is truly a two-generation program that supports the healthy development of young children and the parent's ability to work and gain economic stability. Thank you.

Birth to Three

The Birth to Three program serves about 10,000 children annually who have developmental delays. Currently, 4,916 children are enrolled in 32 comprehensive programs across 162 communities.

The Birth to Three System has made it through the initial stages of implementing a change to a fee-for-service billing system, following a federal mandate. With a slight delay due to technical issues during the transition, over 49,000 claims have now been submitted to Medicaid and commercial insurance has started paying as well. We have worked with DSS to ensure providers remain whole in the interim.

Part C of the IDEA has been a two generation program since it started in 1993. In keeping with that purpose, our State's Systemic Improvement Plan continues to scale up family-centered evidence-based practices including coaching and supporting families in their natural learning environments. Last year, 86% of the families surveyed reported that Early Intervention helped them communicate effectively about their children's needs and 95% reported that Birth to Three helped them help their child to develop and learn. Parent empowerment is a primary goal of Early Intervention since on average children are only enrolled for 11 months.

Evidence-Based Home Visiting

Evidence-based home visiting, representing approximately \$20 million of the agency's budget, is comprised of state-funded Nurturing Families Network programs (\$10.2 M) and federally-funded Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting programs (MIECHV) (\$9.1M). Each year, approximately 2,200 children and their families receive weekly home visits designed to improve maternal and child health, prevent child abuse and neglect, encourage positive parenting, and promote child development and school readiness. Screenings to assess for maternal depression, child developmental delays and social and emotional health are standard in home visiting programs and referrals for further assessment and services bring additional 2Gen support to families and may reduce the need for more costly interventions in the future.

In addition to the MIECHV home visiting award, OEC received a \$1.5M competitive Innovation award through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to develop, implement and evaluate an innovation that would strengthen and improve the delivery of home visiting services.

Advancing a family first, 2Gen mission through cross-silo collaboration and partnerships

The enabling legislation that created OEC called on us to be family-centered and work across silos, recognizing that it is challenging to get great results for young children without addressing the conditions and circumstances of parents and caregivers. Too often, government services are fragmented and uncoordinated, resulting in higher expense and suboptimal outcomes. Following the principals of the legislature's two-generation initiative, the OEC has taken steps to better coordinate its services with our sister agencies and with outside partners, forging new partnerships and attracting new resources to Connecticut.

Below are examples of new resources attained in partnership with sister state agencies.

Expanding use of federal funds for parental training and wrap-around services with DSS

- The federal SNAP Education & Training program allows for unlimited federal match of state funds. For families on SNAP, these funds can provide dollar-for-dollar match of state expenses on education and training (such as community colleges) as well wrap-around supports to help families overcome barriers to success, including child care and transportation among other needs. The Department of Social Services (DSS) and OEC are collaborating with the federal government to develop a data-driven approach to scale the program in Connecticut.

Medicaid funding to expand evidence-based home visiting working with DSS

- OEC won a philanthropic technical assistance award that is providing OEC and DSS guidance on opportunities for expansion of home visiting services through Medicaid.

ESSA Opportunity District collaboration with SDE

- The OEC is working in collaboration with the State Department of Education (SDE) to ensure that early childhood practices are strategically embedded in Connecticut's Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan. The OEC/SDE team was selected as one of four

states to partner with Education Counsel (with funding from Heising-Simons Foundation) to leverage opportunities within ESSA to build birth to third grade systems at the state and district level. The following three activities are underway: 1) Development of the early childhood landscape analysis toolkit for districts; 2) Development of best practices for a pre-k to kindergarten transition guide; and 3) Development of evidence-based guidance for age 3 to grade 3 programming which will serve as spending guidance for LEAs when applying for Title funding. OEC will co-lead on Early Learning and support SDE as needed for others.

Increasing child nutrition and reducing asthma with DPH

- The Head Start Collaboration Office and the Department of Public Health are taking new steps to advance connections between Head Start programming and WIC through co-locating services and information sharing, reducing parental burden in navigating programs while increasing child nutrition. We are also supporting a DPH initiative to address the most common chronic disease in young children, asthma, through innovative remediation.

Promoting a two generation systems approach

- In addition to our family-first mission, the revised two generation legislation now charges OEC with advancing multi-generational policy change. We are collaborating with leaders across agencies with an emphasis on systems changes that can make family services both more cost-effective and results-driven.

Performance-driven infrastructure to build evidence, increase accountability, and achieve results

OEC is building an enabling infrastructure for outcomes accountability and continuous improvement toward measurable results. By advancing better data systems, customer feedback mechanisms, and outcomes-driven contracting, we will get smarter and spend smarter, becoming more cost-effective as we achieve better results.

Launched nation's first early childhood outcomes rate card contract

- Last month we announced the first ever early childhood rate card contract with home visiting providers. This means we can use our *existing* federal funds and new philanthropic support from the Hartford Foundation to reward providers based on their achievement of child and family outcomes. Not inputs, not outputs. Outcomes. We will provide providers bonus payments for each family that avoids: high-risk, pre-term birth; child abuse and neglect; and emergency room trips. We also reward providers for parental employment or enrollment in education and training programs. It's a smart way to spend, it's better for families, it rewards and strengthens providers to do their best work, less fettered by us, and it helps make a positive short and long-term fiscal impact on our sister agencies like DCF, DSS, and DOL.

Won federal grant to support cross-agency data sharing

- OEC applied for and won a federal grant and additional philanthropic support to strengthen integrated data systems (IDS) across agencies that can improve research and

evaluation, inform policy effectiveness, and support predictive analytics to enable smart targeting of resources where it will be most impactful. Five agencies have joined the IDS effort, which may leverage the P20WIN network.

Won federal grant to link data systems to outcomes contracting

- OEC won a federal Social Innovation Fund award to link administrative data systems and outcomes contracting. By connecting reliable data to contracts, we can more efficiently and clearly understand performance of providers, aim for continuous improvement, and hold ourselves and contractors accountable for better serving those in need, and better stewarding public resources.

Won federal grant to advance parental employment and wraparound services via data sharing

- OEC designed and authored a proposal that won a \$1.1 million federal grant, via DSS, for the SNAP Education & Training program noted above.

Engaging stakeholders to improve the ECE system

- OEC won support from the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative to advance a statewide, multi-phase, multi stakeholder feedback process to create a more effective and streamlined ECE system. The process is well underway, has informed our legislative proposals for the session, and is a step toward delivering on OEC's promise of being a transparent and responsive state agency.

Won federal grant to enhance parental engagement and improve research

- The Office of Early Childhood (OEC) has been awarded a one-year federal supplemental grant totaling \$1,375,000 to build upon the successful implementation of its federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) program. The OEC will target these funds toward the infrastructure and systems-level changes necessary to enhance and sustain the high-quality elements and eligibility requirements from CT's PDG program. Funds will improve the state's ability to track, analyze and share data from its Early Childhood Information System (ECIS) and expand parent and community engagement practices to better serve children and families.

Collaboration for new eligibility and enrollment system with federal funding

- Working with DSS, we will modernize and streamline our Care 4 Kids eligibility and enrollment system, benefiting from over \$10 million in funding from the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services that DSS will deploy in support of the OEC system.

Increasing criminal background check efficiencies for providers

- A new background check system will greatly help providers track the status of their staff, reducing their time and providing timely information. Additionally, a new fingerprint training pilot program has proven effective in reducing staff time spent traveling to get fingerprints taken and reducing fingerprint rejection rates.