

State of Connecticut

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Dear Advocates for Children:

By now I'm sure you've closely reviewed the Child Advocate's investigative report on the Department of Children and Families' juvenile justice facilities: the CT Juvenile Training School (CJTS) and Pueblo Unit dated July 22, 2015. I'm sure you were also equally shocked and disgusted by the findings of this study and the blatant underreporting and lack of investigation by DCF into many of the whistleblowing complaints made by individuals who had witnessed clear and inexcusable child abuse within our state's juvenile justice facilities.

In light of the findings of this new report, and in addition to long Commissioner Katz's persistent autocratic leadership and misplaced priorities, I am asking that she resign from her position as commissioner. I would like to know if you will stand with me today and support my call for her to resign so that DCF can move forward.

While the Commissioner has recently touted her commitment to a 'rehabilitative model of juvenile justice' I question her sincerity given her long history of dismissive behavior and repeated inexcusable issues within the system. Where is the rehabilitation when abuse is rampant within your facilities? Where is the rehabilitation when children are being arrested while under your supervision? Where is the 'second chance' for Connecticut's kids if the trauma and abuse they've experienced throughout their life is not stopped, but rather continues under the care of DCF?

I am asking Commissioner Katz to resign because this report highlights continued problems within the system that Katz has failed to recognize before and therefore failed to prevent. We owe it to the children in our state to ensure DCF is run as effectively as possible. Sadly, under current leadership children are being harmed. That's not right.

As you consider the performance of Commissioner Katz, I ask that you remember how we got to the point we are at today.

First, Commissioner Katz has failed to address persistent concerns about the safety of children in both CJTS and Pueblo Unit.

- Despite concerns raised by, among others, the Center for Children's Advocacy, Connecticut Voices for Children and our own state Child Advocate, the Commissioner forged ahead with the development of Pueblo Unit, a new high security prison like facility for juvenile girls. It only took a few months for advocates to raise concerns regarding the increasing number of children being incarcerated and the rising use of violent physical restraints in DCF facilities. In September 2014, the Child Advocate took the unprecedented step of reporting DCF for child abuse based on the repeated use of violent "prone restraints" at Pueblo. The report released today confirms multiple cases of abuse which were underreported.
- In response to the Connecticut Juvenile Training School Advisory Board's recommendations in 2014 to increase transparency, institute an independent ombudsman and review, and implement new quality assessment tools, the Commissioner rejected their proposals. In addition, she terminated the Chairman of the Advisory Board and decided to 'reconstitute' the board with handpicked members.
- The Commissioner failed to implement recommendations made in a shocking report from Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform regarding DCF's locked facilities. After failing to implement many of the most substantive recommendations, she commissioned another report with a hand-picked consultant.
- The Commissioner also failed to support legislation put forward this year to implement the recommended changes supported by the Child Advocate and the CJTS Advisory Board. These included efforts to:
 - a) create a new independent ombudsman to give children incarcerated at CJTS and Pueblo a voice and a safe place to report complaints,
 - b) improve transparency and increase public access to the department's records,
 - c) increase the independence of the CJTS Advisory Group,
 - d) require an outside independent agency to review the department's child protection policies and procedures, and
 - e) implement a nationally recognized quality assurance program to allow DCF to better collect and report data.

In addition, Commissioner Katz has blindly sought to reduce caseloads and residential placements at all costs, including the cost of child safety.

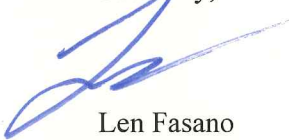
- The Child Advocate's Child Fatality Report released last year notes the "unprecedented" number of child homicides involving children who should have been protected by DCF. In many cases, DCF seems to have ignored multiple known risk factors, such as drug abuse and a known history of family violence, in order keep the child in the home and avoid out of home placements. "Family preservation" should be the goal of effective child protection policies that keep children safe, not a policy in and of itself. Instead, Commissioner Katz placed "family preservation" above actual child safety.

- The dismantling of Connecticut's residential treatment system and the rush to "de-institutionalize" children with no effective plan to meet their needs is causing serious harm to the very children DCF is obligated to serve and protect. Children with serious mental health needs are showing up at hospital emergency rooms at alarming rates and often languishing for days because they have nowhere else to go. Connecticut Children's Medical Center reports that the number of children with mental health needs spending multiple nights in the ER has tripled since 2010. Yale-New Haven Hospital reports that many children are admitted to the ER five or six times a year as parents struggle to find appropriate services.
- As part of her effort to improve her residential placement statistics, the Commissioner has used her authority to deny out of state placements and effectively veto all out of state placement recommendations, even when supported by the children, their representatives, social workers and juvenile court personnel. Ignoring the best interests of the child, she has forced children to remain in inadequate in-state facilities where their condition actually worsens and then released them into the community with no safety net in place.
- As reported in the most recent court monitor report, under Katz' leadership, DCF has consistently failed to meet 7 critical quality benchmarks, up from 6 in 2010 before she took office. DCF's performance on these standards has actually deteriorated on her watch. For example, the court monitor found that DCF developed adequate treatment plans for children only 47.2% of the time compared to 86.5% in 2010 and also successfully met children's needs only 47.2% of the time compared to 67.3% in 2010. DCF failed to meet 306 identifiable needs of children in its care. This is a more than 30% increase from just last year and a 125% increase or more than twice the number of unmet needs in 2010.

I find this long history of mismanagement and failure to protect some of the neediest children appalling. I hope you will support my call for the commissioner to resign. The safety and well-being of Connecticut's children depend on reforming the system. Commissioner Katz has repeatedly blocked needed reform and transparency.

I'm sure you agree with me that it is impossible for any person of good conscience to read this report and not want to take immediate action to resolve these issues. Therefore, I hope you will join me in asking for Commissioner Katz to resign.

Sincerely,



Len Fasano
Senate Minority Leader