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**Testimony Before the New York State Assembly Committees on Labor,
Children and Families, and Social Services on
Access to Quality Child Care**

October 2, 2007

**Presented by
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New York State Child Care Coordinating Council**

My name is Carol Saginaw and I am the Executive Director of the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council (NYSCCCC), which I will refer to in my testimony as the Council. The Council is a statewide, not-for-profit organization, whose mission is to promote excellence in early care and education with equal access for all families. We do this primarily through the support of, and in partnership with, a strong network of community-based organizations that provide Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) services. We work in collaboration with other early care and education professionals and organizations towards the establishment of a comprehensive system that responds to the needs of all families regardless of income, cultural background or family composition; adequately prepares and compensates the early childhood workforce; and involves all segments of the state and local community in the planning process. The Council provides training, technical assistance, data collection, information and public education services to organizations, state and local government, businesses and concerned individuals across the state.

I am also testifying today on behalf of *Winning Beginning NY*, a statewide coalition of more than 60 organizations and individuals committed to quality early learning opportunities for all children, beginning at birth. *Winning Beginning NY* is a statewide campaign to inform policymakers and the public about the many benefits of early learning to children, families and society and to build broad-based support for making investment in quality early care and education a top priority in New York State. The coalition is co-convened by the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, the New York State Association for the Education of Young Children, Child Care, Inc. and the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council.

I would like to thank the Committees for holding this series of hearings focused on the critical issue of quality. For too long, the focus in early care and education has been on quantity to the detriment of quality. Parents need affordable care that supports their ability to work. Children need early childhood programs that provide developmentally appropriate early learning experiences with a workforce that is both educated and appropriately compensated. The two should not be mutually exclusive.

Barriers to Access

Subsidies

Too few families have access to affordable child care. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, in NYS there are 767,952 families with 1,361,044 young children (below 5 years old). Forty-one percent of those young children live in low-income families, defined as below 200% of the federal poverty level. Forty-nine percent (269,857) have a parent who is working full-time, full year and 26% (144,879) have a parent who is employed part-year or part-time. Many of these low-income families need child care. A recent report by the National

Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies cites the cost of child care in New York as among the highest in the nation. Yet, New York State does not provide sufficient financial support to parents who cannot easily afford child care. Funding for child care subsidies in NYS has decreased from a high of \$929 million in FY2004-05 to this year's \$879 million, a decrease of \$50 million. This has impacted upon the ability of low-income families to access care. In 2006, child care block grant funding supported a monthly average of approximately 70,000 families with an unduplicated count of approximately 120,000 children under five receiving subsidized child care. This is a substantial drop from those served in 2003 and 2004 when more than 83,000 families with over 140,000 children received subsidy assistance for child care.

Lack of financial assistance leaves many working families scrambling for child care. Some use a patchwork of caregivers to cover work schedules and many use unregulated care situations about whose safety and quality we know very little. These makeshift solutions can leave parents stressed and concerned about the well-being of their children. Employers are impacted as well when unreliable child care situations result in absenteeism and sub-standard work performance.

Winning Beginning NY is asking for \$140 million in next year's budget to restore subsidies to the more than 14,000 children who have lost care since 2004 and to expand subsidies to the thousands of eligible families with children who are in need of such care.

Parental Co-Payments

Barriers to care occur in other forms as well. New York's state supervised, county-administered child care system is fraught with inequities. While the State maintains an eligibility level for subsidies of 200% of poverty, individual counties may choose to "prioritize" families, effectively

setting different eligibility levels across the state. And, New York is one of only five states that do not have a uniform fee scale across the state. Each county determines its own parent fee scale with the result that similarly situated families pay dramatically different fees for child care, depending solely upon the county in which they reside; some families may only pay 10% of their marginal income while other families pay 35%. New York State should eliminate this inequity for low-income families and cap parental co-payments for child care across the state at 10% of gross family income. Further, no family under the poverty level should be required make any payments.

Additional County Inequities

In addition to the co-payment differences outlined above, counties have chosen other variations in child care administration, which increases the fragmentation of the system. For example, some districts have a policy for paying for child care for young children when their parents, who have night jobs, need child care in order to sleep; other districts have a policy of not doing so. Some districts will pay a higher rate to child care providers who are accredited or when the parent needs child care during nontraditional hours or days; others will not. Only 10 of 58 districts pay for transportation to and from providers. Whether a district pays for child care during short breaks in employment is a county option. Even the way that 18 and 19 year olds in the family unit are budgeted is a county option. Where a family lives in this state should not impact on the benefits it receives from a federally funded program.

Child Support Requirements for Child Care

Another issue of concern, the current requirement that all applicants and recipients of child care subsidies seek a child support order or lose eligibility for child care assistance, should be

reconsidered. This non-statutory requirement has already begun to have a devastating impact on low-income women and their children, as well as on the child care system as a whole.

Low-income parents often have jobs that they cannot easily leave and the amount of time required to seek a court order is substantial for them – three to four days. Further, in instances when it is already a known that the non-custodial parent is incarcerated, disabled or on Supplemental Security Income, seeking such an order not only threatens the custodial parent’s job security but wastes valuable family court time.

While we believe that custodial parents should be encouraged to seek support orders from non-contributing parents, there are often reasons why vulnerable, low-income families do not seek such support. Sometimes a fragile relationship exists with the non-custodial parent that will quickly be severed when a court order is sought. In other instances, not seeking a court order has been important for the safety of the custodial parent, as in cases where abuse has occurred. Child care intake workers are not specialists in domestic violence and have not been adequately trained to undertake such screenings.

A survey undertaken by the New York State Association of Directors of Not-for-Profit Day Care Centers, Inc., found that the impact has been most devastating in areas with a high percentage of Latino/Hispanic families. According to Howard Milbert, co-chair of that organization and NYSCCCC Board Member, the survey also found that Latino/Hispanic parents are reluctant to pursue child support “because of their precarious immigration status, or because they have been told by their immigration lawyers that any type of court suit would be detrimental to their petition for citizenship.”

The regulation is excessively punitive to economically vulnerable families. While the penalty for non-cooperation in the public assistance arena is a 25% decrease in the total grant, the penalty for non-cooperation under the regulation is the loss of the entire child care subsidy. This is true even if there is more than one non-custodial parent involved and one of them is cooperating. Further, when the non-custodial parent stops paying the child care add-on (an earmarked portion of the child support payment) and the county picks up that parent's share, that amount paid becomes an overpayment to the custodial parent.

NYSCCCC has heard from CCR&R network members across the state that child care providers are witnessing families leaving subsidized regulated care to seek alternative venues of care for their children. Given that these are families that qualify for subsidies, their options for finding quality care at an affordable cost are greatly diminished. Our CCR&R network members further state that a significant number of child care programs have closed as a result of the loss of children to the regulated system, a by-product that negatively impacts the early care and education system as a whole. We believe that removing the child support requirement would allow the State to engage more families in the child support collection process than it does with the requirement in place. By educating young parents instead of imposing a requirement that may encourage them to leave the subsidy system, we can help them to engage in the child support process in a manner that promotes the safety and health of the family as a whole. We applaud the Assembly's efforts to rescind this requirement as part of last year's budget and urge you to continue that effort in the upcoming legislative session.

Workforce Quality Supports and Compensation

Of critical importance as well is that providers be treated equitably and be appropriately compensated for their services. *Winning Beginning NY* has proposed that New York State make

a down payment this coming year of \$15 million to promote higher quality in the State’s early childhood workforce by launching the Excellence in Early Childhood Workforce Initiative. Research shows that a qualified workforce is critical to achieving positive outcomes for children. Yet the State’s early childhood workforce has been left behind, poorly compensated and without the resources to seek the education and credentials they need and want to provide quality care and education. The State failed to renew the recruitment and retention program for the field and has not passed a loan forgiveness bill that would support the early childhood workforce in obtaining additional education. And, while 60% of Pre-K is provided in child care settings, teachers in public school Pre-K programs are paid significantly more than those in community-based programs. As a result, community-based Pre-K teachers leave as soon as they are able to secure employment in the public school system. The results for children and families are disastrous—the shortage of qualified early childhood professionals is at an all-time high, with turnover running 30 to 40 percent in many community programs. A growing number of early childhood workers are leaving the field permanently.

The Excellence in Early Childhood Workforce Initiative targets new investments in the workforce to four key areas that will strategically enhance the qualifications of both the current workforce and any new professionals to the field. Taken together, these strategies provide a road map to building on the ambition, talent, and dedication of workers already on the job and to attracting the professionals to the field that the State needs to meet its goals to provide high-quality early learning and care, starting at birth. It includes: scholarships, mentoring and bonuses for workers already in the field who seek to improve their education and training; loan forgiveness for early childhood professionals for every year they stay in the field; equitable compensation for early childhood professionals, regardless of setting; and professional pathways

for informal providers who make a commitment to becoming regulated. A detailed copy of the initiative is attached.

New York State has promoted a number of important quality initiatives over the years including Infant Toddler Regional Resource Centers. Research clearly documents the importance of the first three years of life in shaping the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children. With approximately 55% of all young children in New York in child care, there is a compelling need to focus specific resources on our very youngest learners, who traditionally have been the most underserved. The seven IT Resource Centers are located in CCR&Rs across the State and work in every county to promote excellence in IT services in all settings. Each Center has IT Specialists with training in the best practices supported by research for IT services. The IT Centers offer direct services to the early care and education community including intensive technical assistance, training, coaching, resource information, and linkages to other social and community supports. They also serve as a best practice information center for parents, the regional Office of Children and Family Services licensing offices, and other professionals working with this age group.

The Council has supported and guided best practices in each of the Regional IT Centers, mentored and trained the IT specialists, and helped set statewide goals and guidelines for further development. But the IT Centers and the Council's IT program are entering the fifth year without any increase in funding. *Winning Beginning NY* is calling upon New York to improve quality and expand access for families with infants and toddlers by increasing funding for the seven IT Regional Resource Centers and the Council's IT program and providing funding for assessing the impact of Center interventions in improving quality. Additional information on this request is attached.

A Quality Rating Improvement System

High-quality early childhood programs have been shown to generate significant economic benefits for their ability to increase school success, reduce crime rates and increase future wages and stability for children who attend such programs. But not all programs produce such results because not all programs provide quality care.

Winning Beginning NY has identified the establishment of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) as one of its top priorities because of its effectiveness in improving program quality. QRIS has been implemented in 14 states, with another 32 in the design phase because of its ability to enhance outcomes for children, educate both providers and consumers about quality, and maximize the use of resources through planning, coordination and common learning standards. A QRIS establishes standards of program excellence. It provides a research-based tool for assessing the quality of early childhood programs and publicizing the results by assigning each program with one to five stars. It provides a roadmap for provider improvement and an accountability measure for progress and funding. It offers a consumer guide that gives parents the tools to select more effectively an appropriate setting for their children. It also creates a comprehensive strategy for aligning the quality of programs and the investment of public resources. By aligning funding, technical assistance and professional development, a QRIS can help the current fragmented early care and education system become more efficient and accountable.

During the past two years, the Council convened a group of diverse stakeholders from across the state including providers, advocates, and representatives from state and local government, unions, child care resource and referral agencies and many members of *Winning Beginning NY*

have been working to develop an outline of what a QRIS might look like in New York State, drawing on the experiences of other states. We are extremely pleased that the new Commissioner of the Office of Children and Family Services, Gladys Carrion, has included the implementation of a QRIS as one of her top initiatives. To support such an effort, *Winning Beginning NY* urges New York State to:

- Allocate funding and staff resources to complete the design of a QRIS based upon the research conducted by the New York State QRIS Work Group. To move implementation forward, OCFS and SED staff should take the lead, joining with members of the NYS QRIS Work Group, to finalize rating standards, design the infrastructure and estimate the costs for managing, staffing and evaluating the system;
- Collect baseline data on the quality of existing early childhood programs in order to assess the impact of a QRIS. Too often, new initiatives in New York are begun without adequate information about current status. Our children are too important and our dollars are too few to fund initiatives without investing in an evaluation component that can accurately assess the impact of programs.
- Allocate funding for several pilot sites to field test components of the QRIS. Several communities across the state have invested in quality improvements (e.g. incentives, technical assistance) and coordinated planning that would provide excellent sites for piloting QRIS to refine the initiative before rolling it out statewide.
- Issue a report and funding request for the following year to launch New York State's Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) provide a vital array of services and programs and function as an essential resource for families, providers, businesses and local governments in every county. CCR&Rs link families to early care and education programs and inform them about the components of quality care, help those who qualify to obtain child care subsidies, work to expand the supply and quality of child care programs in their community, provide support to parents and providers through Infant/Toddler Regional Centers and much more. In 2006, CCR&Rs also became legally exempt enrollment agents in the 58 upstate counties, working hand-in-hand with county government to help ensure that non-regulated child care programs serving subsidized children provide safe environments for those children. Over the last 16 years, CCR&Rs have provided services to New York State's 62 counties, with a number of CCR&Rs providing services to multiple counties. The state has invested significantly in these infrastructure programs and CCR&Rs have truly become the "hub" for early care and education in New York. This past year, funding was cut to many of our CCR&Rs during an RFP process. Fortunately, the Legislature restored funding to the 2006 level for all CCR&Rs. The state has used that funding as one-time add-on to the CCR&R contracts with the intent of once again reducing funds for many upstate agencies. CCR&Rs are an important participant in ensuring quality in early childhood programs and they will be a key component of a quality rating and improvement system. I urge the Legislature to ensure that funding to these essential programs is not cut in the 2008-09 budget.

Quality early care and education programs allow parents to go to work knowing that their children are safe and cared for in an environment that promotes early learning and that lays the foundation for success in school and life. Research indicates that children who participate in

quality early childhood programs have less need for special education and remediation throughout their schooling, earn more and are incarcerated less often in adulthood. Investing in quality early child care centers, family and group family child care homes, Head Start and Pre-kindergarten, is a win-win scenario for New York State's families, businesses, workers, taxpayers and for everyone who cares about the well-being of the State's children. Thank you.