

April 5, 2006

Ms. Patricia Walsh
Deputy Commissioner of Probation
Office of the Commissioner of Probation
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108-1612

Dear Pat:

I am writing in response to your letter, dated March 24, 2006. I want to thank you for your continued participation and dedication to the CHINS Task Force. It is critical for us to understand the work that is done by probation officers in relation to the children and families in the CHINS system.

I do appreciate the concerns outlined in your letter and I thank you for taking the time to specify these concerns. As you know, I have continually approached this work with an open mind and with no pre-conceived notion of what changes may be needed in the CHINS system. I also think that all members of the CHINS Task Force can agree that there are always ways to improve upon the services we offer the children and families of the Commonwealth and the purpose of the Task Force is to explore the current system and possible alternatives that may better serve these children and families. That is why it is imperative that we are successful at our efforts to collect data and are able to examine how the current system is working. That is also why the Vera summary did not and should not specify how changes in Massachusetts would be handled – that is one of the functions of our Task Force.

It is also important to point out that the summary, produced by the Vera Institute of Justice, of the CHINS Retreat, held on February 6 and 7, 2006, is just that – a summary of the discussions that took place - not a “report.” The document that you refer to in your letter is merely a follow-up memo produced by the professionals who facilitated the meeting and reviewed by my office prior to dissemination. This is an important distinction due to the nature of your request to have the memo “corrected,” and re-disseminated. While I agree that any “report” that is produced by the CHINS Task Force and represents recommendations that have been agreed upon should be reviewed by all parties, this summary of the meeting is not a report and does not represent any

recommendations; again, it simply summarizes the general discussions that took place at the retreat.

I would also like to point out that this summary attempts to include the diverse opinions and positions of the various stakeholders. For example, on page three the summary states:

“Attendees held differing opinions on how best to effectuate this needed change. Some questioned whether statutory redrafting is needed or whether improving probation’s access to services would be sufficient. Other participants commented that statutory change would be critical to ensure that specific and uniform reform takes place statewide. The role of individual agencies and providers was also an area of discussion. There was debate regarding whether DSS, probation, or a community based provider would be best positioned to be the first point of contact for a family seeking CHINS services.”

Again, I am very grateful to you and the Commissioner for your continued work on the CHINS Task Force and I do appreciate your concerns. I would be happy to meet with you to discuss your concerns further at any time. I look forward to continuing to work with you and the other six Chief Probation Officers that have been actively participating.

Sincerely,

Senator Karen E. Spilka
Chair, Joint Committee on Children and Families

cc: Representative Paul Donato