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Resource for Families of Children with Disabilities Experiences "Growth Spurt" with Gifts from Two Foundations

The Connecticut Family Support Network (CTFSN), an organization that provides support to families raising children with disabilities and special healthcare needs, recently received gifts from two prominent local foundations.

After providing technical and mentoring support for the past year, the Children's Fund of Connecticut (CFC) has presented CTFSN with a gift of \$3,500 to support core infrastructure building within the organization. This gift is in addition to funds previously donated to support leadership development and CTFSN's Federal 501c3 application, which was recently approved. The Children's Fund leadership also provided an introduction to the J. Walton Bissell Foundation that has paid off handsomely in the form of a \$10,000 check received just before the end of the year.

Created in 2001, the CTFSN has a staff that includes 10 parents of children with special needs. CTFSN staff leverage their personal experience to help families navigate the state's complex service systems. They know how to find and access services, and then complement these family focused efforts with organized advocacy.

A large issue is that parents of children with special needs are often anxious about their children during critical development years and through critical transitions. CTFSN staff work with families to access and finance early intervention, special education and healthcare services, preparing for the very important transition to adult life. Jennifer Carroll, Executive Director of CTFSN, noted that transition issues can become particularly acute when children with disabilities become adults and programs and services are no longer entitlements. Vital financial and service supports can disappear while costs to the family skyrocket.

In addition to direct family support, the CTFSN plays a critical role in organized advocacy at the community, policy-making and legislative levels to ensure that programs continue to meet the changing needs of families. Carroll said, "We advocate to be sure that state leaders who are creating Connecticut law and appropriating funds understand what our families need and why. Our policy advocacy efforts have resulted in tangible outcomes that include expansion of funding to family support programs and to families directly."

Over the past year, CTFSN has assisted over 5,500 parents and professionals across Connecticut serving a wide variety of families and communities.

In a recent interview, Carroll observed, "Over the past ten years, the CTFSN has grown into a widely recognized and reliable statewide resource for families and providers. The demand for our work has grown with our reputation. By 2009 it became clear to our leadership that the most effective way for us to expand outreach and impact and acquire much needed unrestricted funding, was to become an independent nonprofit organization. The Children's Fund of Connecticut, with their generous gift and other support, made it possible for us to take this important step. Now, with the addition of the Bissell Foundation's generosity, we can make further progress in setting up our administrative and financial systems as well as in doing the strategic planning needed to maximize our effectiveness."

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