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## Dodd Plans Hearings On 'State Of The American Child'

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By DANIELA ALTIMARI, [altimari@courant.com](mailto:altimari@courant.com)

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U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd helped launch the Senate's Children Caucus in 1983. The then-freshman senator, recently divorced and childless, was an unlikely advocate. And children, a nonvoting constituency whose needs were hardly at the forefront of the national agenda, were an unlikely cause in Congress.

Yet the caucus created the framework for a crusade that would define Dodd's career and, ultimately, shape his legacy. The caucus championed early childhood education, funding for child care programs and the Family and Medical Leave Act, the landmark 1993 law that allows workers unpaid time off to care for a new baby or a sick relative.

"You can give Sen. Dodd credit for moving children into a preeminent position," said Elaine Zimmerman, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, a state-funded panel that promotes public policies benefiting children and families. "He's really been a hero to children nationally."

With Dodd's time in the U.S. Senate coming to a close — faced with a steep decline in his public approval rating, he decided in January not to run for a sixth term — he is returning to his most enduring issue. Before the congressional session ends in early January, he will hold four hearings on "The State of the American Child," intending to lay the groundwork for his successors in the U.S. Senate to take up the cause.

The hearings will be sweeping in scope, touching on every aspect of childhood, from birth to adulthood. The first hearing, to be held in Washington on Tuesday, will include testimony from Zimmerman and Alma Powell, chairwoman of America's Promise Alliance; Harry Holzer, a Georgetown University economist; and Jack Lund, president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater New York. A second hearing will be held in Connecticut in late June, according to Dodd's office. The last two hearings will be held in Washington.

The goal is to provide a comprehensive look at the issues faced by children and families so that Congress can draft legislation to address their needs.



For more than a year, Dodd's to-do list has been dominated by financial reform and, prior to that, the health care overhaul. But with those matters largely resolved, the chairman of the children's subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, will return to a cause he first embarked upon when he formed the caucus with then-Republican Sen. Arlen Specter in June 1983.

In a recent interview reflecting on his time in the Senate, Dodd, now the father of two young girls, said he drew the greatest satisfaction from his work on the HELP committee. "That's where I've enjoyed my work the most — working on the children's issues, child care, family leave ... after-school [programs], Head Start. Those issues have given me the greatest sense of satisfaction from a public policy standpoint."

Zimmerman said it is fitting for Dodd to return to an issue that has had a profound impact on the lives of millions of Americans. She called the hearings the "perfect bookends" to Dodd's long career.

"Losing him is like losing the largest oak tree in the forest," Zimmerman added. "But he's setting the stage so the work continues and children won't be forgotten."

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