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**Testimony of
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before the Commerce-Justice-Science Subcommittee
of the House Appropriations Committee
on Thursday, April 2, 2009
in support of the
Ohel At-Risk Youth and Child Abuse Prevention Program**

Chairman Mollohan and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity today to discuss the challenges faced by many children and young adults in our society and the issues that place them at-risk for juvenile delinquency. I am here specifically to share the successes achieved through Ohel's **At-Risk Youth and Child Abuse Prevention Program** -- a comprehensive set of school-based prevention, education and intervention programs to enhance the social and emotional functioning of children and adolescents who are at-risk or are victims of abuse. This program operates in three states, and funding support has been requested in the Fiscal Year 2010 Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations bill through the "Office of Juvenile Justice and Prevention Programs" within the U.S. Department of Justice for the following programs: \$525,000 for New York State; \$420,000 for Northern New Jersey; and \$360,000 for South Florida.

Background on Ohel Children's Home and Family Services

To provide you with some background information, Ohel Children's Home and Family Services is a pioneering, not-for-profit social services organization committed to elevating lives of individuals with mental illness, developmental disabilities and families in crisis throughout the New York Metropolitan area. Services are also provided in New Jersey and South Florida. Ohel strives to deliver services of excellence in a culturally sensitive manner through all phases of life. As an awareness driver, educator, and service provider, Ohel is proactive in confronting community ailments and empowering professionals and others with the tools of prevention and support. Ohel positively impacts the way social issues are addressed in the community and consistently receives "Excellent" ratings in all of its programs.

The Prevalence of At-Risk Youth

According to data released by The United States Department of Health and Human Services in 2007, 12 out of every 1,000 children in the United States are found to be victims of some form of maltreatment. Some abuse survivors need assistance to handle the tormenting memories of acts perpetrated against them. Many victims of abuse also suffer from eating disorders, drug and alcohol addictions and bullying. Early detection and screening for abuse and child safety is critical in ruling out more serious behavioral manifestation of abuse.

Lack of knowledge, fear, shame, and a shroud of silence within communities of culture have resulted in multiplying problems for youth. Youth services such as outreach and treatment to pre-adolescents, adolescents, and their families, as well as education to professionals and the community at large, have been part of virtually every Ohel program for years. Ohel has been invited by the community into numerous schools to provide preventive services for youth identified as being at risk for future social and emotional deficits, as well as remediation of problems with children who currently are in need of counseling. Ohel's emphasis in prevention and crisis intervention services are essential in helping children and adolescents to develop skills that will promote a healthy lifestyle as they mature.

Major risk factors contributing to the pervasive problems of youth at risk include: delinquent peer groups; poor school performance; chronically dysfunctional families; and exposure to abusive situations, including physical and sexual abuse and domestic violence. Other youth experience life-altering events including the death of a family member or friend that, if not properly addressed, can lead to at-risk behavior.

Communities of culture have experienced a veil of silence surrounding the problem of youth at-risk. Compounding the problem, denial and ignorance of the issues facing youth at-risk, including the prevalence of substance abuse and promiscuity, have limited effective prevention and service delivery to this population. School-aged children, parents, school administrators and educators are not sufficiently informed about the prevalence of at-risk behaviors and their dangers, and lack awareness about the symptoms which often arise in youth as precursors to delinquent behaviors including: poor social skills, weak academic performance, and feelings of alienation and low self-worth.

As an example a 1999 report conducted by New York's Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty found that approximately 1,500 teens in one enclave in Brooklyn, New York were engaging in serious at-risk behaviors including sexual promiscuity, aggression at home and school, substance and alcohol abuse, drug dealing, property destruction, vandalism, theft, truancy, running away from home, and suicide ideation. The report also notes that there are an additional 2,000 youth that are engaged in some of the above-defined behaviors in somewhat less overt ways.

The Met Council issued an updated comprehensive report in October 2003 on the growing problem of youth at-risk. It identified the most prevalent issues of concern as

family dysfunction, substance abuse, peer pressure, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and sexual acting-out behavior. Their research included a survey administered regarding availability of existing services to address these problems. Prevention services for sexual abuse, sex education, social issues, eating disorders, and relationship violence were found to be only nominally available. Recommendations included an increase in school-based interventions, community education, training, and skill building. What was once thought to be statistically insignificant has been transformed into a subculture of children who have learned to cling together in social groups and lead a marginal existence on the fringe of the community.

Ohel's experience with its school-based prevention and life skills development program indicates that there are a growing number of youth who are at risk of substance abuse or are currently experimenting with chemical substances. Typically, underlying factors can be attributed to the risk behaviors that further alienate youth from their communities. They often suffer from unstable and/or neglectful family lives. Many parents, preoccupied with large families and financial worries, lack the time and/or appropriate parenting skills to assist their adolescents in making healthy decisions.

Many of the families living in the communities served by Ohel have large families. The majority of these families are well-supported by a community and culture that puts children first above all other concerns, nevertheless there are families and children who inevitably fall through the cracks. Additionally, the developmental, temperamental or emotional problems a child may be experiencing may be exacerbated by limited parental resources due to financial, occupational, and/or social stressors that some families face. This is all the more highlighted by today's economic crisis effecting families across the social, cultural and economic spectrum. Given these factors, some children exhibit substance and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, poor school performance, truancy, and dysfunctional familial relations.

Ohel's Solution: A Comprehensive Program Targeting At-Risk Youth

Ohel's comprehensive "At-Risk Youth and Child Abuse Prevention" program engages at-risk youth in elementary and high schools to enhance their social and emotional functioning, as well as prevent and treat risky behaviors, including those that often lead to addictions and violence. The program includes school-based services, community education, crisis intervention, psychological counseling, teacher training, and mentoring.

The programs interact with students and include the use of role-playing, small discussion groups, videos, and modeling exercises that use current topics of discussion. Training is provided for teachers, guidance counselors, and principals, and workshops for parents emphasize communication with children. Through community seminars, Ohel offers public forums for parents, educators, and community leaders on topics including self esteem, conflict resolution (bullying, anger management, etc.), relationship building (social skills training, peer pressure, etc.), and prevention of at-risk behaviors such as addictions, eating disorders, gambling, and abuse.

Ohel's school-based mobile intervention team works with day schools and community groups to provide evaluations, crisis intervention, and trauma and grief counseling sessions for a variety of emotional, behavioral, and/or social problems, including those related to alcohol, drugs, violence, abuse, and inappropriate sexual activity. Left unattended, such problems can compel a child toward a downward spiral. By meeting with the children and administrators in their school, Ohel provides its services in a non-threatening and familiar setting and allows its professionals to intervene in a timely fashion with a specifically tailored approach.

Ohel utilizes a multi-pronged, community-based integrated approach to promote the acquisition of developmental assets that have been shown to reduce risk-taking behaviors in adolescent populations. The school-based program is built on the trust that has already been forged with these schools. Through its experience and current research on evidence-based practices cited in the July 2004 edition of *Social Work* in an article entitled "Adolescent Substance Abuse: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Prevention Strategies," Ohel has formulated its program strategy on the premise that: (1) Building self esteem is not adequately effective in prevention programs; (2) Scare tactics have little effect on youth behavior choices; and (3) There is no single approach that will work universally.

To be effective, an education, prevention, and intervention program must:

- Have continual contact with participants;
- Be multi-faceted, cumulative, and community-based. This includes working with teachers, parents, media, and the community to surround youth with appropriate information and messages;
- Maximize positive peer influence, which has an enormous effect on youth;
- Help youth deal with real-life situations; and
- Provide concrete methods for youth to resist negative pressure and avoid succumbing to adverse behaviors.

Youth spend most of their waking hours in school where teachers and peers influence many of their decisions. School-based outreach and education activities target:

- Youngsters in mainstream schools that can benefit from learning strategies for healthy choices and living;
- Adolescent populations who are in specialized schools that address the needs of marginal students with a history of adjustment and behavior disorders;
- Principals and educators to help them implement successful programs for their student body; and
- Parents who are unaware of and/or have difficulty addressing these issues with their youngsters.

The provision of culturally sensitive services is one of Ohel's most vital goals. Ohel places the highest priority on recruiting, identifying, and training professionally competent and culturally representative staff members. Many of Ohel's professionals are multi-lingual, culturally conversant with, understanding and sensitive to the cultural norms and mores of the target community, since some are members of the target

community. Research has shown (U.S. DHHS ACF Resources on Youth Development) that focusing on youths' positive qualities and involving them in strength building activities is an effective technique for eliminating risk behaviors. Youth development is used both to prevent negative behaviors as well as to encourage changes in adolescents who are already engaging in at-risk activities. In addition, teaching adolescents factual information about the importance of making healthy choices will ensure that students receive medically accurate, comprehensive, and comprehensible information, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will be victimized.

Program activities are designed to help youth see themselves as youth at promise rather than youth at risk. Educational and motivational presentations, guided discussions, and mentoring, help develop the skills enabling youth to understand and evaluate factors that influence their decisions and learn to make healthy life choices. Skills development will help youth to succeed, paving the way for the future.

Ohel has had a successful mentoring program benefitting hundreds of adolescents ages 11-17. The target population has expanded beyond those who are at risk with presenting problems but also those "middle of the road" youth to strengthen and prevent them from developing risky behaviors as well as training them to be future role models and leaders. Ohel's mentoring program has utilized scores of volunteer and paid mentors in their twenties and thirties both part time and full time. These relationships between mentor and adolescent form strong bonds that carry forward for years. The return on investment has proven to be a best practice and enormously successful when compared to other models where youth exhibiting risky behaviors are not engaged, who then slide into deeper problems and require a more serious mental health intervention such as psychiatric treatment, medication, and the criminal justice system.

Benefit to the Public:

Without intervention, youth may drop out of school, forfeiting the opportunity to become independent and self-sufficient members of society. Alternatively, with support and guidance, youth can acquire the personal skills and values to make choices that encourage them to remain and advance in school. Through workshops and counseling, youth will improve coping skills, gain self-respect, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and demonstrate responsibility towards their peers, families, and schools.

Ohel's At-Risk Youth and Child Abuse Prevention Program benefits taxpayers and the public in that it prevents "at-risk" behaviors from spiraling into juvenile delinquency, putting kids back on a successful track and thus saving significant local, state and Federal expenditures by keeping them out of the juvenile justice system.

Mr. Chairman, with Federal support, Ohel seeks to expand its programs in New York, New Jersey and Florida so that the children and young adults who are the victims of abuse or who are confronted with challenging circumstances can get the counseling and intervention services they need to move forward in a constructive manner, rather than develop patterns for ongoing destructive behavior. I thank you again for your time and attention to this important matter.