

Human Services Committee Public Hearing

March 13, 2007

Support for Bill #1338: *AN ACT CONCERNING A COST OF LIVING INCREASE FOR PRIVATE PROVIDERS OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES*

Ann Levie, West Hartford Resident/Board of Directors, Jewish Association for Community Living

Good afternoon Senator Harris, Representative Villano and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Ann Levie and I live in West Hartford. I come before you today to testify on behalf of Bill 1338, *AN ACT CONCERNING A COST OF LIVING INCREASE FOR PRIVATE PROVIDERS OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES*.

I am here serving double duty today. I am the single mother of an adopted daughter with mental retardation and a member of the board of directors of the Jewish Association of Community Living, - JCL- agency that provides housing and support to people challenged with intellectual disabilities that live in our community.

This bill is vitally important to me in both my roles. First and most importantly as a mother I want what other parents want: the best quality of life for our children that society can provide. In the case of Arsenia, (my daughter), that means, people around her that support her as she lives her life as independently and productively she can. It means care and support from people we know and trust, like a JCL. It doesn't mean living with her mother until she is 40 years old and I am in my sixties!

Providing consistent, high quality care costs more everyday. The working people, who provide the care at JCL and other private non-profit agencies, pay the same increasing cost of gas to travel to their jobs that you do. Their home heating bills have increased for them the same way it has for everyone in this room and if they live in West Hartford, Hartford, or one of the other towns in the area, their homes were just reevaluated and their taxes or rent are poised to increase just like yours. Each year the cost of health care benefits go up for the employee and the employer. If the workers hired by the private non-profit agency can't keep up with their bills, they will look for a job that CAN support them. They will leave and then clients and parents will have to begin all over, building a relationship with someone new. They might even go work for the state at wages 50-60% higher than ours. Care-giving is one of the most intimate jobs there is. Job-hopping and quality care for the disabled is fundamentally incompatible. It is up to you to help the agencies maintain stability by funding a cost of living increase so that the employees can come closer to receiving a fair wage and the nonprofit agencies can address the other non-discretionary costs that impact them.

As secretary of the board for the JCL, I am well aware that the costs are increasing for all aspects of our agency. In order to try to keep the workforce stable, the board recently voted on the first increase to our starting salary since 1999 in an effort to maintain our dedicated workforce! It is now \$11.50 per hour or \$23,920. As modest as that is, we will have a very difficult time absorbing the cost of this increase going forward if there is no COLA in the next biennium. As a board, we are constantly having fundraisers and trying to raise money to keep up with costs. The truth is that with out funding from the State through The Department of Mental Retardation, we could never support the people in our care. Without needed appropriations from you, we will be forced to hunker down and simply try to keep the dike from bursting.

Arsenia is on the waiting list for placement. She is 21 and is growing increasingly anxious living at home with mom and "her rules". She wants to move out like many of her peers have. Who knows how long she will be on the waiting list? As her mom, I would like to see her dream come true as soon as possible, but she hasn't received funding. Even when she does, it likely won't be enough to support her at the agency she is eventually referred to. As a mother, I want to tell JCL's executive director, Denis Geary, "Take the money available and just accept the client. Just stretch a little more, we can always support more people." As a responsible board member, however, I am at odds with accepting more placements until the funding matches our costs a little more closely. We have a no-win situation brewing. How do we manage the people we are supporting when our costs have grown so much faster than our funding? How do we help ease the emergency represented by every person on the waiting list and accept more clients? It's good that there some money for the waiting list but you can't keep adding floors on a shaky foundation.

Help prevent us from having to make these awful decisions. Fund Bill 1338, *AN ACT CONCERNING A COST OF LIVING INCREASE FOR PRIVATE PROVIDERS OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES*. Provide the COLA requested at 7% for FY08 and 5% for FY09. Our agencies can't thrive, or maybe even survive, on the 2% average increases received over the last seven years and the prospects of no additional funding for the next two. Please bring this annual ritual of begging for realistic COLAs to an end once and for all.

Thank you.