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**Testimony before the Human Services Committee in support of
S.B. 1350 – An Act Concerning Administration of the
State Administered General Assistance Program
S.B. 1361 – An Act Concerning Administration of the
Temporary Family Assistance Program
Submitted by Maggie Adair, Policy Director
Connecticut Association for Human Services
March 8, 2007**

Good morning, Senator Harris, Representative Villano, and members of the Human Services Committee. I am Maggie Adair, Policy Director of the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide nonprofit organization that works to reduce poverty, strengthen families, and reconnect communities through advocacy supported by outreach, research, and education. I am testifying on behalf of CAHS and as a member of the Welfare Working Group, a group of about 25 advocates that has monitored the state's Temporary Family Assistance program and its impact on low-income families since the inception of welfare reform in 1996.

Our organization's outreach work is integral to identifying and shaping our advocacy agenda. Daily, our outreach staff go into the community to inform people about services they can access to help them make ends meet, and often to begin building assets. They talk with people and learn about the "real-life" challenges of struggling to provide for their families with limited resources, and often, with little hope. They learn about how difficult it can be to access the services they need to move meet basic needs and build the necessary skills to bring home a living wage. They meet up with people with life stories that many of us cannot imagine. Our outreach staff brings home to us the significant challenges low-income people face day in, day out. **They do not let us forget about poverty and remind us of the rapidly growing wealth disparity in Connecticut and our nation.**

It in this context that I am submitting testimony today. We support two bills that will help individuals meet basic needs in the State Administered General Assistance Program, and increase the ability for individuals in the Temporary Family Assistance Program to remain employed and move toward a more secure economic future.

S.B. 1350 – An Act Concerning Administration of the SAGA Program

The State Administered General Assistance Program (SAGA) assists those who are destitute, having *no more than \$250 in assets*, and who are unemployable or disabled. They live in severe poverty conditions. Of the 4,148 SAGA recipients receiving cash assistance, 2,168 are women and 1,980 are men. Most SAGA recipients are deemed unemployable and have disability applications pending with the federal Social Security Administration.

SAGA recipients currently receive between \$200 and \$50 a month in cash assistance. **That is less than the maximum \$350 they received prior to the state budget cuts in 2003.** It's hard to believe that Connecticut would allow for our most vulnerable citizens to struggle on such little income, deny cost-of-living increases for years and years, and then cut it even further. S.B. 1350 would increase SAGA cash assistance to \$333 per month, which is the current monthly rate for Temporary Family Assistance.

The total cost of the SAGA cash program is about \$10 million, but keep in mind that Connecticut receives federal reimbursement for half of the costs of those SAGA clients who become eligible for SSI. In 2005, the state was reimbursed \$3,452,123 for SAGA cash expenditures. According to the Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut, it's estimated that increasing the rate to \$333 will cost the state an additional \$5 million with about half of that reimbursable by the federal government.

It's time to lend a *hand up* to our most fragile citizens.

S.B. 1361 – An Act Concerning Administration of the Temporary Family Assistance Program.

This bill would help Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) recipients stay in the workforce, provide for their families, and help them move from poverty to economic self-sufficiency. We support the following provisions:

Increase cash assistance benefits by 10 percent. A family of three, in most of the state, receives \$543 per month under the TFA program. It is extremely troubling that it *has not increased since 1995*. The high cost of living in Connecticut, such as housing and energy, makes it impossible to get by – yet succeed – with this amount of money. The Program Review & Investigations report on welfare reform projected that if the cash assistance had kept pace with inflation since 1991, families would be receiving \$849 per month. **For these families, the additional \$306 would make a *huge difference* in their budget and their lives.**

Exempt working parents with disabilities. This is a logical change that would allow parents with disabilities to work a limited number of hours (as many as they are able) without being subject to TFA time limits and work requirements. Current policy does not allow a parent who is “incapacitated” to work *at all* (even 1 hour per week) if they are to be exempt from time limits and work requirements. However, some of these individuals *can work a limited number or hours* and **they want to work**. Working gives people a sense of purpose and presence in the community and can enhance their psychological and physical health. This provision makes sense. Let's allow disabled people to work the few hours that they can without jeopardizing their cash assistance and work exemption. **We want Connecticut residents to be working and productive members of society.**

Establish a work transition program and eliminate income cliffs. This provision would alleviate the income “cliffs” that families experience after they reach the 21-month period, or reach the end of a six-month extension. Families leaving TFA cash assistance engaged in work activities that meet federal work requirements, but remain very poor, would continue to receive reduced cash benefits for up to a year. Under current policy, a working family loses all cash assistance and experiences a significant drop in income. If we want TFA participants to stay employed and move forward in life, an income transition makes a lot of sense.

Expand the Safety Net families who play by the rules. The current safety net policy is illogical. This program provides non-cash vouchers for basic needs and case management to identify barriers to employment. The problem is that it is only open to families who are sanctioned off cash assistance because they fail to meet program requirements. Meanwhile, families who play by the rules and lose cash assistance once they reach time limits, but have not yet found sufficient employment, do not receive safety net services. **Not only is this policy illogical, it is blatantly unfair. We urge the Committee to fix the safety net rules.**

Please consider the important proposals to improve the SAGA and TFA program and improve the quality of life of people who may lack many an economic cushion, resources, and community connections that others have from the start. Some proposals provide an economic lifeline to our most vulnerable citizens; others provide an opportunity for struggling families to improve their current economic situation and move toward a stable future.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.