

State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

5 exhibits
included in
Att. File

Committee on Human Services
Public Hearing
March 11, 2008

Testimony Submitted by Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director

Senator Harris, Representative Villano and Members of the Committee,

My name is Elaine Zimmerman and I serve as the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children. I am here today in support of the bills before you that would help reverse poverty for children and families in our state. As you know, we have the strongest law in the nation to reduce child poverty by 50 percent by 2014. Yet our poverty level is not going down. One in ten children in Connecticut lives below the federal poverty level. One in four children in our state lives below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and the rate has worsened in recent years.

The bills before you, particularly, **SB 660, An Act Concerning Establishment of a Food Stamp Employment and Training Program and Fund** and **SB 666, An Act Concerning the Reduction of Child Poverty** would help us get closer to our state goal. The former offers an underutilized funding stream for employability; the latter addresses specific populations facing poverty with targeted programming. In addition **H.B. 5907, An Act Concerning the Temporary Family Assistance Program** would address cash assistance "cliffs" in the program and assist families who are currently penalized unnecessarily in the program.

SB 660 - An Act Concerning Establishment of a Food Stamp Employment and Training Program

The bill creates a fund aligned with the goals of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council to assist in all areas allowable and deemed pertinent to both increase employability and wages. The source for this fund is the federal Food Stamp Employment and Training (FSET) Program which is part of the Nutrition Title of the Farm Bill. It was created to help Food Stamp recipients gain skills, training, or experience and to increase their ability to obtain regular employment.

- The FSET Program is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is 100% federal grants and

offers a 50-50 match for program operation, including costs such as dependent care, transportation and other participant expenses.

- FSET match funding is user-friendly and readily available as a source of funds for state and local agencies, community colleges, non-profit community organizations and other education and training entities.
- FSET is uncapped and separate from the 100% Food Stamp formula allocation that all states receive. The match funding is administered as a cost reimbursement program.
- Matching funds may include dollars from state budgets, foundation grants, employer contributions and tuition payments. FSET dollars can be used in place of TANF funding, freeing some TANF funds to be used in other ways.
- FSET dollars can be used to provide childcare services at the same rate of reimbursement as the Childcare Block Grant, potentially increasing the state's early care and education slots for low-income families.
- The FSET funds could be utilized for many of the recently selected Child Poverty and Prevention Council priorities. These include, but are not limited to, case management and employment related services, adult literacy and GED for families receiving TFA, post-secondary education, and child care.
- The FSET funds, if designed within the scope and intentions of the federal criteria, could also be used for fatherhood initiatives, teen pregnancy reduction and youth dropout programs.

I would recommend that language be added to the bill that protects the interests and partnership of community agencies and community colleges that might be less inclined to partner if their match dollars were not clearly protected and given to them for employability programming at the local level.

SB 666 - An Act Concerning Child Poverty

The bill renders it easier to apply for food stamps for those low-income families that are eligible. Currently many do not participate due to the need for an interview. Without transportation, this requirement adds a burden and decreases our participation rate. More than one third (38 percent) of persons eligible for food stamps in Connecticut are not accessing the service, and 55 percent of the eligible working poor in our state are unserved. On both measures, Connecticut's participation rate for food stamps is worse than the national average, although the state has improved its overall participation rate in recent years. Our state's low participation rate results in decreased federal funds received by the state.

Increasing the number of food stamp recipients would provide economic benefits to

Connecticut communities. The Food Stamp Program brings federal dollars into communities in the form of benefits which are redeemed by food stamp participants at local stores. These benefits ripple throughout local economies. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, increasing the number of Connecticut residents served by the Food Stamps program by five percent would result in \$14.7 million in economic activity.

The bill creates or enhances programs for target populations who, with research-based intervention and support, could turn towards more opportunity. This includes teen pregnancy reduction, school dropout prevention, attention to young minority males and an increased focus on fatherhood.

The bill also creates a necessary and strong two-generation strategy and planning for the young mother with a new infant who is on TFA for a year. It offers her more rigorous assessment, employment planning, literacy and child development through home visitation and cohesive programming for both the mother and the child. Ordinarily, we help one or the other. Ordinarily, we do not link health, child development, employment planning and literacy. This is a model to help young mothers have a real plan and hope before they hit a cliff at the end of their time on welfare assistance.

SB 666 takes some of the strategies and target populations selected by the expert panel who assisted the Child Poverty and Prevention Council in prioritizing targets and strategies that would help us meet our goal of a 50% poverty reduction. The experts came together in consensus across party and area of policy interest to advise us on what works and has the greatest impact. I enclose their report in this packet.

They target young children, teens and young adults and the working poor. They speak to a focus on family structure, education, literacy, employability and a focus on minority males. So does this bill. Attached are the Commission on Children's recommendations to amend the bill language.

Raised Bill No. 5907, An Act Concerning the Temporary Family Assistance Program.

This bill seeks to ease the cliffs in payments for families moving from welfare to work. The bill would assist families who have reached the 21 month time limit and who are not available for extensions. These families have complied with all the rules and requirements of the TANF program and experience great hardship when the cash assistance is so drastically diminished upon a date certain without opportunity to accommodate the reality of the paying bills without less income.

A number of states have adopted these "post employment" programs to assist families as they make the transition to work and to boost the state's work participation rate to meet federal requirements. This policy initiative is supported by the research of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council that has identified addressing "cliffs" in safety net programs as a significant measure to assist families.

The bill also seeks to address additional restrictions in the current TFA program that would help families. These include: exempting from the time limits people with disabilities working as much as their impairments allow; adding homelessness or risk of homelessness as an enumerated barrier to employment; and passing more child support on to families.

The TANF Program is not set up to assist families out of poverty, but is established as a Jobs First program regardless of whether or not the job provides enough income to support a family. Fortunately, Connecticut is waging a counter offense and developing programs and policies to help families achieve a standard of living that moves them out of poverty.

The Commission applauds the leadership of Senator Harris and Representative Villano in raising these bills and we believe they vision what is in the major recommendations of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Connecticut Commission on Children

Recommended changes to Raised Bill No. 666

March 11, 2008

General Assembly

Raised Bill No. 666

February Session, 2008

LCO No. 3035



Referred to Committee on Human Services

Introduced by:

(HS)

AN ACT CONCERNING THE REDUCTION OF CHILD POVERTY.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. Section 17b-27a of the general statutes is amended by renumbering the existing section as subsection (a) and adding the following subsections (b) through (e)(NEW) (Effective July 1, 2008)

~~(a)(b)~~ The Office of Policy and Management, in conjunction with the Department of Social Services, shall, within available appropriations, establish a fatherhood grant program to provide award grants to municipalities eligible entities to encourage and promote the positive involvement of low-income fathers in raising their children by providing assistance and support services for such fathers.

~~(bc)~~ The Office of Policy and Management Department of Social Services shall award grants to municipalities eligible entities under this section for programs and services that provide (1) employment and training opportunities for low-income fathers to increase the earning capacity of such fathers; (2) classes in parenting and financial management; and (3) other support services and

programs that promote responsible parenting, financial stability, and communication and interaction between fathers and their children.

(ed) Applicants for grants provided pursuant to this section shall apply annually to the ~~Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management~~ Department of Social Services at such time and in such manner as the ~~secretary~~ department prescribes. The ~~secretary~~ department shall require a grantee to (1) implement accountability measures and results-based outcomes as a condition of being awarded a grant; and (2) leverage funds through existing resources and collaboration with community-based and nonprofit organizations ~~in the municipality~~. The ~~secretary~~ department may establish additional criteria for the award of grants pursuant to this section.

(de) Not later than July 1, 2009, and annually thereafter, the ~~Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management~~ Department of Social Services shall report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to human services on the grant program's effectiveness in achieving the goals specified in subsection (ab) of this section.

Sec. 2. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2008*) (a) The Department of Education, in collaboration with the youth futures committee established pursuant to section 1 of public act 06-182, shall, within available appropriations, establish a grant program to provide grants to five school districts ~~municipalities with a population greater than one hundred thousand~~ to improve the educational and career outcomes for minority male youths ~~in such municipalities~~. Grants awarded under this section shall be used to provide such youths with access to (1) educational and career mentoring programs; and (2) classes on leadership skills, resume writing and interviewing skills, conflict resolution, citizenship and personal accountability, including sexual responsibility.

(b) Applicants for grants provided pursuant to this section shall apply annually to the Commissioner of Education at such time and in such manner as the commissioner prescribes. The Department of Education may retain up to five per cent of the funds appropriated to administer the program.

(c) Not later than July 1, 2009, and annually thereafter, the Commissioner of Education shall report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to human services, education and appropriations on the efficacy of the grant program in improving the educational and career outcomes of such youths.

Sec. 3. (*Effective from passage*) The Department of Social Services shall develop a plan to implement an on-line application for the food stamp program. Not later

than September 1, 2008, the department shall report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, on the plan to the Governor and to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to human services. Such report shall include the cost of such plan and document the availability of federal resources to fund such plan.

Sec. 4. (NEW) (*Effective from passage*) Not later than September 1, 2008, the Department of Social Services, within available appropriations, shall make available a prescreening tool on the department's web site to aid potential food stamp program applicants in determining their eligibility for the program.

Sec. 5. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2008*) (a) The Department of Social Services shall, within available appropriations, administer a competitive grant program to provide grants to municipalities-eligible entities to serve communities with a high rate of teen-adolescent pregnancy and school dropouts to fund programs to reduce teen-adolescent pregnancy and to promote positive youth development outcomes.

(b) Applicants for grants shall apply annually to the Commissioner of Social Services at such time and in such manner as the commissioner prescribes. The commissioner shall require a grantee to implement research-based programs focused on reducing and preventing teen pregnancy and preparing youth for college, employment and citizenship, and to demonstrate its plans to leverage funds through existing resources and collaboration with community providers, schools and other public and private partnerships. The commissioner may develop additional criteria for the awarding of grants under this section. The Department of Social Services may seek private funds for the program and retain up to five per cent of the funds appropriated to administer the program.

(c) Grants awarded under this section shall be used to fund: (1) Career planning and mentoring; (2) health and sex education; (3) enrichment activities; (4) violence prevention; (5) peer network and support; (6) school advocacy and tutoring; (7) mental health counseling; (8) drug and alcohol risk assessment; and (9) life skills development.

(d) Not later than July 1, 2009, and annually thereafter, the commissioner shall report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to human services on the program's effectiveness in reducing teen pregnancy and achieving academic success and other positive outcomes for youth participating in the program.

Sec. 6. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2008*) The Department of Social Services, in conjunction with the Departments of Education and Children and Families and the Children's Trust Fund, shall establish, within available appropriations, a

work readiness pilot program for first-time ~~mothers~~parents with children under the age of one who are exempt from the work participation requirements of the temporary assistance for needy families program. The pilot program shall focus on strategies to achieve the following goals: (1) Improve the literacy skills and basic educational levels of the parent; (2) promote the participation of the parent with his or her child's education; (3) allow a child to reach his or her full educational potential; (4) move families toward self-sufficiency and out of poverty; and (5) provide opportunities for the parent to obtain education, skills and knowledge necessary to obtain employment after the exemption period is over.

(b) The pilot program shall be conducted in up to five geographically targeted neighborhoods with a high percentage of teen ~~mothers~~parents. Such pilot program shall be located in an area accessible to the parent and his or her child. The pilot program shall coordinate the following existing programs into a cohesive program for the parent and child: (1) The Nurturing Families Network established pursuant to section 17a-56 of the general statutes; (2) the Healthy Start program; (3) the Department Of Social Services' "Jobs First" program; (4) the HUSKY Plan; and (5) any other safety net programs. The department shall develop interagency agreements to coordinate programs to implement the pilot program.

(c) The pilot program shall include, but not be limited to: (1) Educational assessment and career planning; (2) literacy programs; (3) high school equivalency preparation; (4) English as a second language; (5) job training and internship opportunities; (6) access to state public institutions of higher education; (7) quality on-site infant care; (8) home visitation; (9) child development, parenting education and peer support; (10) health and mental health services; and (11) basic needs, including, but not limited to, safe and adequate housing.

(d) The department shall monitor the outcomes of participants of the program, including, but not limited to, the percentage of children meeting age and developmental milestones, and the percentage of ~~mothers~~parents earning high school diplomas or achieving other educational goals and the percentage of successful job placements and job retention.

(e) Not later than July 1, 2009, and annually thereafter, the Commissioner of Social Services shall report, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education, human services and appropriations and to the Child Poverty and Prevention Council, on the effectiveness of the program in achieving the goals specified in subsection (a) of this section.

Sec. 7. (Effective July 1, 2008) The sum of one million dollars is appropriated to the Department of Social Services, from the General Fund, for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, for the pilot program established pursuant to section 6 of this act.

Sec. 8. (Effective July 1, 2008) The sum of ____ dollars is appropriated to the Department of Social Services, from the General Fund, for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, for increased funds for ~~the birth-to-three system~~ infant-toddler child care.

Sec. 9. (Effective July 1, 2008) The sum of ____ dollars is appropriated to the Department of Children and Families, from the General Fund, for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, for increased funds for the kinship navigator program, established pursuant to section 17a-98a of the 2008 supplement to the general statutes.

