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March 26, 2009
Before the Judiciary Committee
TESTIMONY OF MELANIE ELLIS STARKS IN SUPPORT OF
SB 1157 re FUNDING FOR LEGAL SERVICES

Good day Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Melanie Ellis Starks. I am an attorney in the Children at Risk Unit of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS) I practice in our New London office serving people in need throughout the county.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about the importance of Legal Services funding to our state's poor.

I chose to begin my legal career at Connecticut Legal Services because I wanted to be an advocate for those who are disadvantaged and often invisible in their communities. I firmly believed then and now that lawyers are uniquely positioned to give a voice to those in our society who are silenced by poverty.

As a young attorney, I have come to see how Legal Services' approach to serving underserved populations provides these individuals with a new voice and respect. I have been taught to take into consideration the day-to-day challenges that face our clients. Mental illness, homelessness, and job insecurity are often elements that complicate the issues that they bring to us. As times have gotten tougher, Legal Services attorneys across practice areas have worked as a team structuring solutions that will allow our state's weakest citizens to maintain a decent existence.

This is a daunting task. However, I welcome the chance to do this work. On a regular basis I am humbled by my clients, and feel rewarded when I can share in their victories.

As a special education attorney, the parents who come to me for help are often unaware of their children's rights. Nonetheless, these parents inspire me because, despite all the challenges in their lives, they are still dedicated to ensuring that their child has a better opportunity. These are individuals who were sidetracked during their own educational journeys, yet value what education could mean for their child-a way out of poverty. They look to legal services to advise them regarding their legal rights and to help the family navigate the often confusing laws governing education.

I can look back at one of my earliest clients as a good example of this. Lee was an 18 year old disabled student at a local high school who was in 10th grade but could barely read. He brought his mother with him because he was embarrassed that he had repeated several grades and was worried he wouldn't understand our discussion. His basic reading and math skills were at a 3rd grade level. His mother had never been able to finish high school. His family's biggest fear was that if something were to



happen to his mother, he would be unable to care for himself. Working with the school and DDS, we developed a unique educational program for Lee that involved tutoring, a mentor and vocational training. This meant that finally Lee would be on a path to self-sufficiency and he was able to successfully hold a part-time job while finishing high school.

As an attorney and a concerned citizen, I am testifying to ask you to protect the rights of our state's weakest citizens by protecting Legal Services. These individuals need Legal Services to speak for them and to fight for them. By cutting legal assistance to this already underserved segment of the population, we will be punishing them for their poverty and limiting their access to their rights.