

February 23, 2009
Before the Appropriations Committee

TESTIMONY OF MIRIAM BERKMAN
in support of legal services funding

My name is Miriam Berkman. I am a clinical social worker and a resident of New Haven. I am a member of the faculty at the Yale University Child Study Center and the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence. For the last 20 years, I have worked in the New Haven community, providing immediate crisis intervention and longer term psychological treatment for children and families who have been exposed to violence and other potentially traumatic events. Based on my experience working with vulnerable families in New Haven I am deeply troubled by the loss of funding for legal services programs that serve poor people in Connecticut, and I am here to urge the Legislature to restore lost funding to these vital programs. The following testimony is based on my personal and professional experience. It does not represent the official position of Yale University.

In our practice at the Child Study Center's Childhood Violent Trauma Clinic, we see hundreds of children each year whose development is placed at risk by their repeated experiences of violence and trauma. These include children who are witness to domestic violence, children who are victims of sexual or physical abuse and children who are victims or witnesses of violence in their communities. Most of these children are poor. My colleagues and I do our best to provide traumatized children and their families with quality mental health care to address the consequences of their traumatic experiences. Often in the course of our work we find that our patients experience complex environmental and legal challenges in addition to their psychological difficulties, and that these legal challenges interfere with children's development and with the process of healing. For example, families are evicted from their homes. Battered women flee to shelter with their children and seek orders of protection and custody of their children. Parents seek aid for their disabled children and disabled parents seek benefits to support their families. In these sorts of situations, it is imperative to help families to address the practical realities of their lives, including the legal challenges they face, if we are to be able to help children get back on track developmentally and psychologically. Safety, stability and family support are prerequisites to trauma treatment. Indeed, these factors are essential to children's development in general.

This is where Legal Aid comes in. Legal services lawyers provide essential representation that helps prevent poor families from losing their homes, assists poor children to receive appropriate medical care, special education and disability benefits, and helps battered women and their children to achieve safety. Without access to legal representation, poor families are more likely to become homeless, to move frequently from place to place, to receive inadequate medical and mental health care and to be victims of consumer fraud. Poor women are less likely to be able to free themselves from abusive relationships or to be able to protect their children from repeated exposure to domestic violence. Poor children are more likely to be denied special education to which

they are entitled. All of these consequences are not only unpleasant for adults but are also detrimental to the development of children, who represent our hopes for the future.

Research and clinical experience have shown that family support and stability are part of the framework for healthy child development. Legal Services contributes to helping poor families achieve and maintain the basic safety and stability their children need. Some might argue that in this time of economic crisis, the State cannot afford to take on new obligations to fund expensive programs like Legal Services. However, when we as a community consider the potential consequences to our children of losing the vital contributions of Legal Services, it becomes clear that we cannot afford to take the risk. For these reasons, I urge the Members of this Committee to find the necessary funds to maintain Connecticut's Legal Services programs. Thank you.