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TESTIMONY OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT CHILD ADVOCACY COALITION  
TO THE  
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
FEBRUARY 23, 2009

Testimony of Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition  
Before the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee

The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony about the necessity of increasing funding for Connecticut Legal Services/Legal Aid to the Appropriations Committee of the 2009 General Assembly.

We understand that these are very difficult economic times because we see the impact of the recession every day in Bridgeport:

- Businesses downsizing or closing their doors altogether.
- An unemployment rate over 10% and rising in Bridgeport.
- The growing numbers of unemployed who are laid off flooding job centers and unemployment offices.
- The increasing numbers of residents without health insurance -- because a job loss usually means no income other than unemployment, making COBRA unaffordable.
- The skyrocketing number of families being turned away from overcrowded homeless shelters as families with no jobs get behind in their rent and are evicted.
- The escalating number of families lining up at food pantries and soup kitchens because they can no longer afford to food.

And every week, things just get worse and worse. And we haven't seen the bottom yet. I fear what that will look like in Bridgeport and in Connecticut's other large cities and poorer smaller communities over this next year or two.

In times like these, low-income families and the working poor are the most vulnerable and easily preyed upon. They don't always know their rights, nor have the confidence to speak up for themselves.

But Connecticut Legal Services, Legal Aid and Legal Assistance and their dedicated lawyers do speak up for Connecticut's low-income residents. Their lawyers defend tenants who are being evicted by unscrupulous landlords. They help those denied health insurance and other public benefits that are part of the state's safety net. These lawyers fight for disabled students to get a good education. And the list could go on. In short, legal services, legal aid and legal assistance lawyers fight for the powerless and ensure their rights. They help families in crisis. They work long hours for less pay than their peers. These lawyers are the heroes of Connecticut.

In this economy, legal services lawyers are more important than ever. IOLTA funding to support them has dropped precipitously. Connecticut legal services/legal aid is facing a shortfall of \$8-9 million. They had been forced to reduce office hours and all staff are taking substantial pay cuts – but they keep working because they are so dedicated.

We strongly urge you to increase state funding for legal services/legal aid in the two-year budget you are developing. We understand that you are making very hard choices to address the budget deficit. But there is no more important program – that stretches every state dollar to the max – than legal services/legal aid programs.

Thank you this opportunity to submit our testimony.

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*The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition is a coalition of more than 80 member organizations dedicated to improving the well-being of Bridgeport's children through research, advocacy, community education and mobilization.*