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Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.
Testimony before Human Services Committee
February 24, 2009
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Greater Hartford Legal Aid

S.B. 6442 "An Act Concerning Work Activities Permitted in the Jobs First Employment Services Program"

I am an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid. I have represented low income Hartford area residents in public benefit matters for many years. I have also served on the TANF Council.

This bill authorizes participation in "unsubsidized work experience," treating the value of SNAP (food stamps) and TFA as wages. In short, this is a workfare program for TFA and food stamps.

This is essentially a remedy for a problem we do not have in Connecticut. Workfare has been tried here, in the old General Assistance program. Frankly it was motivated by the hope that it would discourage people from applying for assistance. The experience proved, to be costly and difficult to administer.

In the TFA program, the participants will be parents. In addition to setting up and staffing the work sites, there will be cost for child care for children who are not in school.

More to the point, though, TFA roles are down by two thirds since the advent of welfare reform. Many families with no income cannot turn to TFA because they have used up their time or been sanctioned off the program. In fact, many who should qualify because they have barriers that keep them from working, typically don't get a chance to apply, because the front line at DSS offices don't have time to ask the appropriate questions. We really do not need further measures to discourage applications for TFA from families who truly need the short term benefit the program affords.

TFA pays a family of three in the Hartford region \$576 per month. Current rules require that family to be enrolled in the Employment Services program, either working, seeking work or participating in a training program. The benefits continue for 21 months with two 6 month extensions possible. As set up, this program already has plenty of incentive for families to find work. As TFA recipients would be the first to tell you, work is clearly a better alternative to TFA.

A final point regarding the SNAP program. This bill would represent a significant retreat from efforts over the past ten years to secure food assistance as a fundamental need, without the stigma of "welfare." As noted in a New York Times article from February 7, even "George W. Bush did not treat food stamps like welfare. He dubbed the program "nutritional assistance" and gave bonuses to states that were most aggressive in signing poor people up."

I would hope that Connecticut's legislature would want to maintain the standard George W. Bush set, and not retreat to stigmatizing the SNAP program with workfare requirements.

