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TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC. IN SUPPORT OF HB No. 5318 AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND S.B. No. 278 AN ACT CONCERNING TRUANCY

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Catherine Holahan and I am the managing attorney of the Children at Risk unit of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). The Children at Risk unit at CLS provides legal representation to low-income families who have children with disabilities, primarily to assist in obtaining appropriate educational and behavioral health services.

I am here to testify in support in HB 5318 An Act Concerning School Resource Officers and SB 278 An Act Concerning Truancy. We urge the Committee to amend HB 5318 so that the training is required for all school resource officers and includes evidence-based interventions.

HB 5318 An Act Concerning School Resource Officers would require the development of a plan for a training course for School Resource Officers (SROs) that includes particular topics relevant to carrying out their duties within the school setting. The presence of school resource officers has increased dramatically in the last decade due to school shootings across the country. The role of SROs is to foster a safe and secure atmosphere using the "Triac Model" consisting of law-enforcement, student counseling, and law-related education. Unfortunately, national studies have shown this increased presence of police officers in the schools has led to increased arrests and criminalization of behavior. In order for SROs to fulfill their intended role, it is crucial that they are provided the tools necessary to understand the student population with whom they interact and the interventions that are the most effective.

One key training topic that is included in this bill is the de-escalation of student behavior, including students with behavioral health and special education needs. Students with disabilities may require particular types of responses to behavior in order to effectively deescalate that behavior, particularly behavior that is a manifestation of their disability. Special education students whose disabilities require certain interventions may have "Behavior Intervention Plans" (BIPs) in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). In our experience, we have found that SROs are often unaware of the potential impact disabilities can have on behavior, how to intervene in disability-related behavior, and that some students have Behavior Intervention Plans to guide intervention with problematic behavior. That lack of awareness often results in unnecessary arrests and criminalization of disability-related behavior.



In 2006, CLS oversaw research conducted by Wesleyan University students on the issue of whether students with disabilities were being disproportionately arrested in 2 Connecticut towns. In doing their research, the students interviewed School Resource Officers, as well as students, parents, teachers and a juvenile court judge. The interviews with 6 SROs from the 2 towns revealed that none were aware of any disability-related factors that they should consider when intervening in student behavior.

Under the CLS Stop the School to Prison Pipeline Project (STOPP), CLS collaborated with the Special Education Department of Waterbury Public Schools and the Waterbury Police Department to develop and provide a training session to all school resource officers in Waterbury. The training focused on the impact of certain disabilities on children's behavior, the particular rights of students with disabilities, and questions to ask when faced with a situation involving students with disabilities (Is there a behavior plan already in place? What steps should be followed?). The feedback that we received from SROs at that training was positive – it was useful information that they had been unaware of and would cause them to approach situations differently in the future.

CLS also **supports SB 278 an Act Concerning Truancy**. This legislation strives to provide consistent definitions for “excused” and “unexcused” absences and to collect data regarding truancy and programs to address truancy in districts across the state. Although Connecticut state law currently depends on certain numbers of unexcused absences to trigger interventions and services (such as FWSN petitions), school districts have very different definitions of what that means. Truancy is such a significant and deep-rooted problem in many of our towns. Having statewide data and information about the problem and effective programs to address it will greatly assist school districts, families and advocates in addressing it at the local level. That data will be meaningful only if the definitions are consistent.

In conclusion, Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. urges the Education Committee to **amend HB 5318 An Act Concerning School Resource Officers to ensure that the training is mandatory and includes evidence-based interventions**. CLS also urges the Committee to **support SB 278 An Act Concerning Truancy**. Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.