



Date: February 26, 2010

Subject: Testimony for HB 5148 An Act Concerning Funding for the Judicial Department

My name is Robert Francis and I am the Executive Director of the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP) serving greater Bridgeport and the state of Connecticut. I am here to speak today in support of HB 5148 An Act Concerning Funding for the Judicial Department and specifically for additional support for Connecticut Legal Services.

RYASAP is the Local Implementation Service Team or LIST for the Department of Children and Families and the Court Supported Services Division of the Judicial Department. LIST's in Connecticut were modeled after our Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force and were replicated in all 13 juvenile court districts in Connecticut as a way of improving communications about state initiatives while giving local communities a vehicle for transmitting its needs and concerns to the state as a way of better serving young people involved with the juvenile justice system. Connecticut Legal Services has been an important contributor in Bridgeport and has assisted in identifying gaps that has resulted in increased services for our young people.

HB 5148 grows out of concern that the Judicial Department has not gotten enough money to do its business and on this fact we agree. As far as Connecticut Legal Services is concerned, they have not received \$1.5 Million, which has forced them to greatly reduce service to people in Connecticut, and without these funds in 2010-2011 will have to further reduce its services. This will not produce a cost savings for the state of Connecticut. Let me explain...

RYASAP is the lead agency for the Juvenile Review Board or JRB in Bridgeport. The JRB has received almost 300 referrals of first time offenders and have connected them with vital services in their communities in lieu of having them appear before the juvenile court resulting in more expensive services later on. Our JRB has had only 3 re-arrests of young people appearing before the board; and judging from the history of JRB's run by Youth Service Bureaus in Connecticut for over 30 years, young people seen by JRB's are highly unlikely to have any further involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The most vulnerable of the young people we serve are those who are poor, come from abusive and neglectful families, and have major educational difficulties or suffer from special education, mental health and substance abuse issues. Connecticut Legal Services has been an invaluable partner with us at RYASAP in providing legal help with homelessness issues, employment rights, domestic violence and other family law matters, educational matters and especially help for children and families with special education needs.

Allow me to illustrate how invaluable CLS has been through a recent case. A 15 year old young woman was referred to the JRB for fighting and causing injury to another young person. She

was scheduled for expulsion from school for her actions. We performed an assessment with the young woman and discovered serious special education needs emanating from learning disabilities and behavioral problems, abuse problems in the home leading to termination of parental rights and future guardianship issues. We asked Legal Services to accompany us to the expulsion hearing and they were able to get us a continuance and granted us a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting. The young woman had never been granted a PPT although there had been several requests over a five year period. Through the intervention by Legal Services, we were able to obtain counseling for the young woman, get her into special education classes, delay any expulsion action and continue investigating any child welfare and custody issues. Without this intervention, this young woman would have been expelled from school without ever having known her legal rights or having her needs addressed. Without the PPT meeting and letters from the attorney outlining the child's rights to service before expulsion, she would not be in school, in all likelihood be homeless, and her mental health and special education needs would not have been addressed.

This case is not atypical but in fact is extremely common. Based on the potential loss of these services, I would hope that the Judiciary Committee recommends restoration of this funding for Legal Services. Thank you for listening to me.



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