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February 11, 2010

Testimony of Steven Eppler-Epstein, Executive Director
Before the Appropriations Committee
Re: DSS & DCF budgets

Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you tonight. My name is Steve Eppler-Epstein; I have been a legal services lawyer for 26 years and am currently the executive director of Connecticut Legal Services, the legal aid program that covers all of the state except Hartford and New Haven.

The budget facing the legislature is truly grim. I know the passion and heart you bring to your responsibilities, and I know that you feel you have no good choices, but still must make choices. We appreciate that you are here in this building, and have the perseverance to see these hard days through.

One of the really frightening things about the current budget situation is that because so many large parts of the budget are hard to address, the Governor and legislature turn their attention to a large group of relatively small-dollar items. And if you are connected to low-income people in Connecticut – which is, in this economy, much more likely than it used to be as the numbers of financially stressed families rise – then you know that each one of these relatively small programs does amazing work to help people, and small dollar savings can reap great harm. That leads me to hope that you, your colleagues on the Finance Committee, and leadership will utilize some of the revenue options being developed by members of the General Assembly and also those being suggested by the Better Choices for Connecticut group. Despite the upset some revenue packages may cause, you may find that the courageous and wise path is to balance the state's budget in ways that lean as little as possible on the most vulnerable members of our society.

I want to speak about a few of the small appropriations items that deserve particular attention; and then mention one small revenue option that I don't think has been on the table.

First, I want to urge you not to adopt the Governor's proposals to further cut back on health care for the poor. It is impossible to see how these proposals improve Connecticut or even the state's budget:



- Increasing co-pays and premiums for Medicaid will result in lower utilization of preventive care and early treatment. There's very little savings from the co-pays themselves; the savings come from keeping people from seeing their doctor. In a vulnerable population, the inevitable result is an increase in severe illness, emergency room visits and hospitalization. It's a terrible result for poor people, but also will cause further deterioration in the state's budget.
- Similarly, limiting access to medications that are available over-the-counter will result in fewer people keeping themselves properly medicated (or taking food off the table to pay for medications). It doesn't take long for more serious, more expensive illnesses to result.
- And why in the world would the state want to stop paying for eyeglass appointments and eyeglasses for low-income adults? Why will any employer participate in someone's transition off welfare if the job applicant can't read the computer screen, or even the job application?

A second area of need, which fortunately has great momentum at this time, is finally to adequately staff the state's domestic violence shelters with 24-7 coverage. The legal aid network and the domestic violence network are close working partners in efforts to get battered women protection and give them options. These services cannot work effectively when either partner is inadequately funded. We spoke the other night about preventing cuts in legal services funding, which certainly would have an impact on services to battered women. But it is also very important that the shelters be staffed adequately to provide the service and safety battered women need while we are all working together to get them to a safer status.

Third, my colleague John Spilka will be speaking with you in detail about the Governor's renewed proposal to stop paying lawyers a small amount if they save the state a lot of money by getting people off state-funded SAGA welfare and onto federal SSI disability. You should know that some people don't need this help. We don't take cases for people who can apply and get on assistance. We take the cases that have been turned down by the Social Security Administration, either because they made the wrong decision or because collecting the necessary proof is very complicated and time-consuming. You want to pay us to get these people with disabilities onto federal assistance, both to save the state money, to bring federal dollars into Connecticut, and because it is a much better level of benefit for these vulnerable people.

Finally, a related thought that could bring the state some revenue. You might consider creating a contractual program to pay legal aid programs to get disabled children in DCF custody onto federal SSI. We estimate that about 30% of the children in DCF custody could be eligible for SSI and are not receiving benefits. If legal services were paid to review case files, obtain additional information, and identify appropriate applications for SSI; and then, as necessary, fight for eligibility for those wrongly turned down by the Social Security Administration, the state

could bring in fair amount of money because, as long as the children are in DCF custody, the money goes to the state. It's a great thing for the children too, because it helps address the poverty of disabled children who have aged out of DCF and have nowhere to go – they would already have an income flow if they were eligible. We don't know the exact numbers – but to give a sense of how much money might be achievable, 1,500 children receiving \$674/month would be about \$12 million per year in revenue for the state. We would be very happy to meet with you and DCF officials to see if funding legal services to take on such a project would be a net gain to the state and to children in DCF custody.

Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

