

Legal Assistance Resource Center

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Testimony before the Select Committee on Children on RB 5360 - An Act Concerning Children in the Recession

by Jane McNichol, Executive Director
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Good afternoon. I am Jane McNichol, Executive Director of the Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut, the advocacy and support center for legal services programs in the state. We represent the interests of very-low income residents of the state. LARCC is also the convenor of the Welfare Working Group, a group of about 25 advocates who have monitored Connecticut's family welfare program since 1995.

First, I want to thank the members of the Children in the Recession Task Force for their work on this important issue and the members of this Committee for continuing that work. R.B. 5360 identifies and addresses many important issues and actions which can help families with children who are struggling to meet the basic needs of their families and to help children not only to survive but to advance in these difficult times.

The provisions in this bill relating to **streamlined and coordinated applications for needed public benefits are particularly important.** People in need who are eligible for state or federal assistance should not be denied that assistance because we have put up too many barriers and created complicated systems which have the effect of denying available assistance or discouraging people from pursuing existing programs.

Section 8 of this bill, relating to the Temporary Family Assistance and Jobs First Employment Services programs, touches on issues that the Welfare Working Group has been following for a number of years. Connecticut's basic family cash welfare program, the Temporary Family Assistance or **TFA program, has one of the shortest time limits for receipt of cash assistance for families in which the parents are deemed able to work.** Families in this category are generally limited to 21 months of cash assistance, with the possibility of two six-month extensions if the family remains very poor and has obeyed program rules. While there are some exceptions to these rules, in reality, most families with a parent who is required to meet the work rules will not receive cash assistance for more than 33 months.

This is too short a time for parents to address barriers to employment in good times. In these times of very high unemployment and limited job opportunities, the time limits are simply absurd. With the recently passed extensions in Unemployment Compensation, workers who have been laid off can receive Unemployment Compensation benefits for 93 weeks – essentially the same 21 month time limit as parents in the TFA program.

This bill would make a third six-month extension available to families if the family remains very poor and has followed program rules when the unemployment rate is above 8%. This is an intelligent and compassionate measure which will provide some income stabilization to families with children during these difficult times. I think that Connecticut's children would be better served if the trigger unemployment rate was 6.5% or if the rate calculation was made regionally. But these are refinements which can be made if this policy is in place when the state's unemployment rate falls below 8% and the state's fiscal condition has improved.

I also welcome the proposed change the Jobs First Employment Services which would mandate including two- and four-year degree programs as approved work activities for parents who are required to meet the state's work requirements. This is a change that members of the Welfare Working Group have long advocated. One path out of poverty is education and training for well-paying jobs. For parents in the JFES program, this path has been consistently blocked by the emphasis on getting a job as quickly as possible and by the bar on approving post-secondary education as a work activity.

This is an important policy change. **There is no reason to limit this change to times when the unemployment rate is above 8%.** I would urge that you rewrite this portion of the statute to make the option of post-secondary education available at any time, not just when the unemployment rate is high.

In adopting this needed change, we should be aware that Connecticut's need to meet federal work participation rates may mean that the state cannot permit every parent who desires and could benefit from post-secondary education to enroll in this education. Under current federal rules, parents engaged in education can only count towards meeting the federal work participation rates to a limited extent.

But we need to make the change proposed in Sec. 8 so that the Department of Labor will begin to approve two- and four-year degree programs as work activities under the state program. Currently, departmental policy forbids including participation in two- and four-year degree programs in an approved work plan. This blanket prohibition is neither required nor necessary under federal law.

We should also work in the coming months and years, as the federal government considers reauthorization of the TANF block grant, to make federal rules more supportive of education and training for JFES parents.

Thank you again for your consideration of this bill and these issues.