



**Testimony regarding the Governor's Recommendations for the Department of Social Services
March 4, 2010**

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut, a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization. Our primary mission is to create long term sustainable solutions to hunger and as such do significant outreach on SNAP, formally known as food stamps, and that is what I will focus on today.

I will touch on three line items in the Governor's budget recommendations. First, the State Supplemental Food Stamp Program, then the funding to get DSS started on the road to modernization and finally the CT Nutrition Assistance line.

We oppose any cuts to the State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SSNAP). This program provides state funded SNAP benefits/food stamps to legal immigrants in Connecticut. Many legal immigrants come to this country to make a new start and offer us in return their cultural experiences, creativity and, once settled and working, a strong tax base. The SNAP allows for legal immigrants to choose the foods they know how to cook rather than the foods given to them at a food pantry, which may be difficult to prepare and eat for them.

SSNAP provides food stamps to legal immigrants in Connecticut until they can participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the new name for food stamps. The USDA allows legal immigrant children, disabled legal immigrants and those who have been in the country for 5 or more years to receive federally SNAP benefits. However, it is during the first 5 years of a person's residency that this type of program is needed the most. Many immigrants come to this country to make a new start and offer us in return their cultural experiences, creativity and, once settled and working, a strong tax base. This program fills the much needed gap left by SNAP rules.

In February of this year, 509 low income immigrants, many of them refugees, participated in this program at a cost to the state of \$68,992 for the month (or \$827,904 for the year). Unlike SNAP, this program's increases in are not large, 25 new participants in the last 3 months, but the need is there and they will be on the program for under 5 years and likely much less.

Currently those who are on the SSNAP are receiving 75% of the federal SNAP benefit. The Governor's budget proposes to cut this benefit to 50% of the federal SNAP benefit which would hurt those who need this program at a most critical time. Those participating are receiving, on average, \$136 for the month, while the new proposal would cut this to \$85 per month, a significant cut to their food budget. We urge you not to make this drastic cut to those who are using the program, and especially NOT to change the legal amount of the benefit to 50%. The savings to the state will *not* be significant yet the harm to the households using the program will be unbearable.

The Nutrition Assistance line pays for high nutritional value food such as proteins and produce for the state's emergency food sites. These funds are provided by the state's two food banks, Foodshare and Connecticut Food Bank to local area providers. These funds are very important as they provide funding

for food that may not be donated in large quantities. It is important to note that the food banks can not charge more than 5 cents per pound for the food (and often much less) and pay the overage for transportation and administration out of their own general funds. It is a partnership between private and public charity. Additionally, I would like to add that this is the majority of funds that the state provides to emergency food providers therefore it is important to keep it in the budget especially when so many are using their services.

Finally, I want to commend the Governor for placing funds into the budget that allows DSS to move forward in modernization which will greatly increase SNAP participation. As I prepared for today's testimony I read the last 10 years of EHC! testimony. Each year is a list of horrible concerning the lack of timeliness, access to, and errors for those applying for SNAP. Last year, I specifically mentioned that Connecticut is likely going to be sanctioned. Staff has consistently been cut at the time when there was the most need. Now, we are in the position of having to pay for our lack of foresight.

There is no question that there is a problem with customer access to DSS. We see it every day. People can't get through on the phone, pieces of their applications are lost, they are denied, or given the wrong amount of SNAP benefits for no reason, and because DSS staff tells them to see us for help. We have adapted to this. We help people fill out their forms, we make sure they have all the supporting documents necessary, and we fax it to a workers computer, securely to DSS. In fact this works so well the USDA gave us a grant to expand our method, called e-Fax. We are a small piece of the puzzle. We have a benefits calculator (that is the basis for the SNAP portion of the Community Action Agencies ABC calculator) that people can go online to see if they are eligible and for how much, we have a toll-free interactive line that allows people to call, again to see if they are eligible. Each person is called back and walked through the process with an outreach worker. We are doing what we can to get people on the program but the state MUST do its part and this is the first indication that there is in fact willingness to do so.

Staff caseloads are up to 1,750 (in 2005 I testified that caseloads of 1,000 were way too many) and more eligibility workers must be hired. The USDA recommended at the hearing two weeks ago that the position of SNAP manager be filled, so there is one person in charge of the program. Given the large number of people on the program, the amount of money that comes into the state from the program – over \$569 million – and the state's current position as last or near last in the nation on error rates and timeliness, proves we need someone who will put all this or her energy into the program. Managing the program itself is more than enough work for one person, not a shared job position. I urge you to consider adding this position as well as increasing line workers for better administration of SNAP.

End Hunger Connecticut!, and the other outreach groups will continue to work to assure people are prepared to get their benefits. When people go to DSS fully prepared they are likely to get their benefits within the 30 days, and for the full amount. We will continue to advocate for those who do not get their benefits, need assistance with their redeterminations, and benefit checks. We know this works. We will do our part and we are glad to see that the state is finally focused on doing its part. Of course we will continue to train organization on SNAP outreach and application assistance so that applications are done correctly. Increased modernization efforts, a new phone system and additional staffing will *help* to create greater access to SNAP. We urge you to put funding into these solutions.

Thank you.