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**Testimony before the Human Services Committee
Re: S.B. 1145 - An Act Concerning Outreach by Community Action Agencies for
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Applicants**

**Submitted by Maggie Adair
Deputy Director, Connecticut Association for Human Services
March 17, 2011**

Good morning, Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak, and members of the Human Services Committee. I am Maggie Adair, Deputy Director of the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a 100-year-old statewide nonprofit organization that works to end poverty and to engage, equip, and empower all families in Connecticut to build a secure future.

I am testifying today regarding **S.B. 1145 – An Act Concerning Outreach by Community Action Agencies for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Applicants**. We support the intent of the bill, but think these intentions can best be addressed administratively. This will allow DSS and community-based organizations, including community action agencies, to also address broader concerns about access.

First, we thank the Committee for ensuring that “community-based organizations” are recognized as important state partners with the Department of Social Services by conducting SNAP outreach across the state. CAHS, End Hunger CT! and the Hispanic Health Council, as part of the State SNAP Outreach Plan, conduct outreach statewide to ensure that people who are eligible for SNAP benefits apply and receive those benefits. The three SNAP outreach organizations also partner with other organizations that also do this type of outreach to extend our reach and impact.

We believe this bill is redundant because SNAP outreach exists across the state. The community action agencies are already required to conduct SNAP outreach with Human Services Infrastructure (HSI) funding. Also, there is no prohibition for other community-based organizations to conduct SNAP outreach. In fact, CAHS partners with 17 other organizations to screen SNAP applications with our electronic screening tool, EarnBenefits Online (EBO). This tool allows us to screen clients for up to 13 public benefits and work supports simultaneously, including SNAP, WIC, Care4Kids, HUSKY, EITC, etc. Information offered by the client is entered into the EBO software and populated into the DSS applications forms. Other organizations use other effective screening tools to enhance outreach, such as End Hunger CT! and 211.

After conducting SNAP outreach for more than 15 years, CAHS is well aware of the infrastructure and technology barriers within DSS that impede accurate and timely delivery of SNAP benefits to families who are struggling to put food on the table. Therefore, CAHS supports the intent of this bill to augment

outreach efforts and assist DSS in speeding up the application, enrollment, and approval process for SNAP benefits. However, the language suggests that this bill would allow community action agencies and community-based organizations to “screen” and “accept” program applications. The USDA explicitly said at the recent General Assembly informational forum on Connecticut’s SNAP program that it would not allow community-based entities to make eligibility decisions; this action must be completed by DSS.

However, there is the potential for community-based organizations to “interview” SNAP applicants. This interview involves posing specific questions to the SNAP applicant about such things as income, household size, etc. As part of the interview process, the SNAP applicant must show documents to verify answers. It is our understanding that USDA would entertain a waiver request to allow community-based organizations to take this additional step by conducting the interview, thereby expediting the process. We understand that DSS has filed for this waiver.

CAHS supports the USDA position that DSS should be the only entity to make eligibility determinations. As the Committee is aware, Connecticut has the worst numbers for timeliness and negative error rates (cases that are wrongly denied or terminated). And while the payment rate is a bit better now, it was the worst in the nation in 2008. Because of DSS poor performance, the state may face a \$1 million penalty from the USDA. Decentralizing the eligibility process would only exacerbate the already dismal situation.

The solution to the host of problems in the SNAP program is infrastructure, technology, and staffing. DSS phone lines are antiquated and frequently shut down. DSS processes 3.7 million pieces of paper each month for benefits. Paper, understandably, is often lost. DSS caseloads are wildly unreasonable. SNAP participation has soared by a 58 percent increase since 2008, due to changes in eligibility and the recession.

DSS is on the right track with the modernization project, though we are frustrated with the delay in making this change happen. The modernization project would create better office accommodations to allow for privacy and respect, call centers, interactive voice response, and online applications for SNAP and other benefits. Modernization would also reconfigure staff roles to enable flexibility in responding to SNAP applications and payments. There would be no paper; the entire process would be processed electronically. Clients would have the option to apply for SNAP on-line, over the phone, or in person.

We are concerned that one critical piece of the project is suspended. It is our understanding that DSS has put the on-line project on hold. The reason given is that Connecticut has the opportunity to overhaul its EMS system under national health care reform and will be reimbursed 90 percent for the cost of the Medicaid portion of the project. Estimated project completion is at least three to four years away. In the meantime, the serious problems with SNAP enrollment will continue due to lack of on-line applications. We urge legislators to push DSS to take a dual track on both the modernization and the EMS project.

In conclusion, SB 1145 misses the point. Changes can be made to the program to improve access, accuracy and accountability, but not as outlined in this bill. Modernization of the SNAP program is what is critically needed. Community-based organizations, such as CAHS, End Hunger CT!, the Hispanic Health Council and others will continue our outreach efforts and work with DSS to ensure that Connecticut’s low-income families receive the benefits they need to put food on the table.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today.