

Good Afternoon. My name is Jay Bartolomei.

I am President of AFSCME Local 714 representing over 800 members, primarily employees of the State of Ct, Dept of Social Services. I also have worked for DSS for 24 years, administering SNAP and formerly Food Stamp Assistance.

While I don't have a fancy PowerPoint presentation and federal funding statistics to confuse you, I feel that I can speak with some authority on the DSS programs. I am not a nameless bureaucrat hiding in some large state office building, but someone who works in one of America's poorest zip codes and talks to the neediest citizens of our state on a daily basis about their basic needs for assistance.

I am speaking today regarding Senate Bill No. 1145:

AN ACT CONCERNING OUTREACH BY COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCIES FOR SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM APPLICANTS

"To expedite the receipt of benefits by participants in the supplemental nutrition assistance program, to maximize federal funds and to reduce the state's error rate by authorizing community action agencies to be intake and outreach centers for the supplemental nutrition assistance program."

Over the course of the last several years we have seen our caseloads increase exponentially without a commensurate increase in staffing to service this state's neediest citizens. We lost many employees under the Rowland layoffs and ERIP program in 2003. In 2009, we lost many more staff to another Retirement Incentive Program. At the same time, the economy plunged and the federal government and Connecticut's new rules made many more people eligible for this assistance than were previously. This combination of factors has created a situation that calls for immediate increased staffing to keep up with exponential growth of the need for SNAP assistance.

This problem has been years in the making and the calls for more staff by our union, many legislators, such as Senator Harp, Rep.'s Walker and Tercyak, and our community partners, were ignored by previous Governors and the leadership representing the Department of Social Services.

I would urge instead of this bill that you provide the necessary DSS positions to fully staff those jobs that administer this program. I would also urge that any new application procedures would fully utilize the DSS worker as the primary person that applicants would apply with.

The Community Action Agencies are partners in delivering many services to the public and can assist some applicants now in applying. However, the DSS Eligibility Worker should be the one to interview the applicant and make the final determination. This would guarantee that the appropriate policy and laws were followed; would offer greater control of program administration; and ensure accountability to the public, to legislators like yourselves and those at the USDA who oversee the program at the federal level.

Other agencies already assist DSS in its mission in delivering SNAP to low income families and individuals. Particularly, End Hunger CT, the Hispanic Health Council, and Foodshare have been assisting the DSS staff for years now in expediting and referring applications and improving access. These agencies have played a lead role in educating the public and

providing application referrals in the SNAP program and have fostered positive working relationships with many DSS workers, managers, and administrators throughout the 12 regional offices.

To add another layer of bureaucracy to the sometimes complex process would only result in more confusion for applicants and DSS staff.

Those of us who work in this program know full well that under the previous administration Social Services aid to the needy was not a priority. Now is the time to add more workers to the Department so we indeed can fully help those who need food assistance and make the program more accessible. Also, if the necessary amount of staff are hired and access is increased, this in turn will increase the state's economic health and have a multiplier effect when those newly granted recipients spend their SNAP dollars at local businesses and in our communities.

I would strongly urge you to reconsider this bill in your decisions regarding future eligibility processing of SNAP cases.

Thank you very much.