The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, Inc.

Testimony in Support of **S.B. No. 1045 (RAISED) AN ACT PROVIDING HOMELESS YOUTHS AND EMANCIPATED MINORS ACCESS TO BIRTH CERTIFICATES.**

March 1, 2011

My name is John Cottrell. I am the Chief Operating Officer for the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport. Since 1978, the year I began working at The Council, the Janus Center for Youth in Crisis has served children and families in the Greater Bridgeport area. A major focus of the Center is on serving runaway and homeless youth. Our primary goal is not only to assist these youth to obtain stability, but to also keep children out of state systems and maintain families.

Our Basic Center Program consists of four main components: 24 hour mobile crisis response, immediate intervention and support, temporary respite care in one of our host homes, and aftercare support once the young person leaves our care. These cover four of the five service components outlined in the bill.

The Janus Center for Youth in Crisis strives to ensure easy access to services needed by youth who "live" on the streets due to extenuating circumstances, do not attend school on a regular basis, and are not involved with any traditional services or who are resistant or don't know how to access traditional services.

I feel it is important to point out the while The Council of Churches is licensed by DCF as a Child Placing Agency, we currently receive no state funding for our services. Our revenue comes from federal grants, local municipalities, foundations, churches and individual donors.

Our staff process approximately four hundred referrals each year. The majority of these calls involve families who are experiencing serious conflicts which if left unattended would likely result in the young person leaving the home. In most cases, with early and immediate intervention, separation can be avoided. The most difficult cases are those where the young person has already left the home.

Runaway and homeless youth often face many barriers that block them from having stabile lives. Most often if a youth runs away from home, they leave with very few belongings, as they rush to get away from the current situation that they are in. One of these barriers for runaway and homeless youth is access to their birth certificate. In our experience in working with this vulnerable population, the parent usually is the one who holds the birth certificate of the youth in fear that the child may lose it if it is in their possession. When the child leaves the home, they often leave without having any type of identification. There have been situations in our work with runaway and homeless youth where the parent refused to give the child their birth certificate as a way of blocking their independence. This is especially relevant when a youth seeks emancipation from their parent or legal guardian.

Obtaining a birth certificate is the first step in receiving permanent identification which includes: passport, driver's license, and Social Security card. To apply for benefits the youth would need at

minimum a birth certificate and Social Security card. If the youth is not able to return home and is eligible for employment, you cannot be legally employed without having proper identification, which might cause the youth to get money in ways that might jeopardize their health and safety.

This bill would provide youth with the opportunity to take advantage of available options legally. This is a vital step in there attempts to have a stable and productive life.

Respectfully submitted,

John R. Cottrell,
Chief Operating Officer