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Jobs First Program

CGA HB-5558 and SB-851

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Good morning Chairman Tercyak and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is George Brusznicki, and I am here today to speak in support of House Bill 5558 and Senate Bill 851, which would allow recipients of benefits under the TANF Jobs First program to use a greater percentage of their time for education. This is extremely important because strengthening an individual's education before entering the workforce has a direct effect on increasing their chances for success in the workplace and of achieving long-term self-sufficiency. The end result of this is a benefit to the entire community.

I have been the Director of Education, Training, and Employment at Community Renewal Team, Inc. for the past seven years. My résumé also includes being the Executive Director of a regional Workforce Board for more than 10 years, working as an Adult Education Consultant, Executive Director of a Chamber of Commerce, Educator and Coordinator for Adult Education Services with the State's Vocational Education System under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. In whole, my 30 years of experience in education and training well qualifies me to speak before you today on behalf of House Bill 5558 and Senate Bill 851.

Since the enactment of "Welfare Reform" in 1996, states have been continually challenged to meet participation rates of TANF customers. As we all know, education and literacy are critical to an individual's future economic success. More important is that fundamental basic skills in

math and English are essential to an individual enrolled in the Job First program, so as to allow them to move out of poverty. This is the mission of CRT and that of other agencies in the State.

Indeed, work participation is at the core of Welfare Reform and the Jobs First Program. During the first years of the implementation of Welfare Reform, I was a strong proponent of mixing education, training and work for Jobs First customers. The argument was always a simple one — we can place people directly into the workplace, but for those without high school diplomas, we would be limiting their future possibility of moving out of poverty if we did not allow them to pursue their education. It is more important than ever that we shift from a work-first approach to long-term poverty reduction strategies and stable employment – which requires an educated workforce.

House Bill 5558 and Senate Bill 851 will create a unique opportunity to meet federal requirements while also serving to move people out of poverty. Moreover, I have learned during my career that if a mother is literate, her child will also benefit in terms of educational achievement. This is a much-needed byproduct in our city, where the dropout rate remains high, and literacy rates remain low.

There are many institutions explicitly named in House Bill 5558, through which educational services can be provided to those in the Jobs First program. However, I want to point out that this is not a comprehensive list. In fact, there are other institutions which are *better* able to provide education programs to non-traditional students, who may not be ready for such classroom-based services. Working with this particular population over the years has taught me a lot. An anecdote to share with you: I once witnessed a participant abruptly leave an adult education class. While he was leaving, he said, “Now I remember why I dropped out of school.” This reminds us that we must prepare students for learning before they enroll in our current educational system – or we must offer them some genuinely flexible alternatives – so that they do not fail again.

Our agency has been funded by the Workforce Alliance of New Haven, CT for the past five years to provide training services to TANF clients. We have run an extremely successful program. This success is a direct result of partnering with adult education, community colleges

and the Chamber of Commerce, along with the workplaces where they get real-world experience. The additional six months of education described in this bill would allow participants to make even greater gains in terms of literacy and long-term self-sufficiency.

These bills are most timely and necessary. However, during difficult economic times, funding of such activities has been a central challenge to the Jobs First Program. We can begin to coordinate resources at the state and community level. As you may know, adult education in Connecticut is funded via a match process. As an example, a community allocates \$1 million, and in turn, the state matches the municipality with an additional \$900,000. As a result, the community has \$1.9 million to provide ESL, ABE, GED and citizenship classes. But it's possible to leverage still more funding for this important function. The Department of Social Services, under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), overseen by the Federal Department of Agriculture, can access a 50-50 federal match for training services, whereby state and local funds can be matched to underwrite training and education services. By expanding eligibility to all TANF participants – not just those who receive food stamps – and establishing a procurement process for a consortium of community providers, the education and training options will be extended still further.

Lastly, this endeavor must be integrated at the community level with Community Action Agencies, the Departments of Education and Higher Education, and the local workforce boards if it is to be a true success.

We strongly encourage you to pass this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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