



## Testimony of Ellen Small Billard, MSW

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### Appropriations Committee Hearing on Department of Social Services Budget

February 17, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of Appropriations Committee. My name is Ellen Small Billard, and I am the coordinator of CABHN, the *Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs*. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

CABHN is a statewide advocacy and outreach network committed to helping CT families meet their basic needs, achieve self-sufficiency, and attain economic security. It is also a participating member of the Welfare Working Group. The Welfare Working Group consists of approximately 25 dedicated advocates who have worked together since 1995 to monitor the impact of Connecticut's family welfare program ("Jobs First") and the federal TANF program on low-income families and to propose policies to improve the program.

I am here this evening to urge you to **reject, or at least modify, Governor Malloy's proposal to cut \$9 million from the Temporary Family Assistance – TANF line item in the Department of Social Services budget.**

Such a reduction will only leave struggling families with fewer options in times of economic crisis.

The justification for this funding reduction is a drop in the Jobs First caseload. **This drop in caseload numbers, however, does not present an entirely accurate picture of the needs of Connecticut's low-income families.**

Over the past 15 years, since the enactment of the federal TANF Block Grant program, the number of families receiving cash assistance in Connecticut has dropped from over 50,000 to around 18,000 now. In addition, the amount of money Connecticut spends on cash assistance has also dropped from \$320 million in 1997 to \$92.5 million in 2010.

It is important to note, however, while it is probable that many families were able to find work and leave assistance during this time period, it is not accurate to conclude all of these families left the Jobs First program because they were able to find work; nor is it safe to assume they maintained those jobs, especially during the economic downturn. Instead, the reduction in families receiving cash assistance can be attributed to:

- 1.) **Families leave the cash-assistance rolls because they exhaust their 21-33 month time limits.** Caseloads are not dramatically rising because more and more families are ineligible for the program.

- 2.) **The insufficiency of Connecticut's Jobs First program to respond in times of economic downturn.** This problem is not unique to Connecticut, as family welfare programs nationwide have failed to provide an adequate safety net for struggling families. But when compared to these other programs, Connecticut ranks as **the 41<sup>st</sup> least responsive** program in the country. It also has some of the nation's strictest time-limits, further limiting its ability to respond to a growing need for assistance.

Thus, it is not a reduction in **need** that accounts for the drop in TFA caseloads, but rather a reduction in **eligibility** that leaves struggling families few options in times of crisis.

*(You can access data referenced on the Legal Assistance Resource Center of CT's website at [www.larcc.org/state-policy-issues](http://www.larcc.org/state-policy-issues).)*

The money that has been cut from the TFA cash assistance budget over the past decade could have been wisely re-invested in support services, job training and education programs, or subsidized employment opportunities. Such programs not only would have helped families in crisis get back on their feet, **but also could have helped them obtain key skills that would have lifted them out of poverty and onto a path toward long-term self-sufficiency.**

Unfortunately, **the budget for such training programs and services has risen by only \$6 million during this time – a missed opportunity to invest wisely in the future of these families.** Instead, the TANF Block Grant funds have been used to plug holes elsewhere in the state budget.

Moving even more money out of this program is not the solution. We must start designing and implementing programs that respond to the needs of families striving to get jobs with few skills in a bad economy.

The Department of Labor has worked to design four pilot programs intended to do exactly that. However, instead of embracing these proposals and allocating TANF funds toward these promising pilots, **the Governor's proposed budget actually cuts the \$150,000 allocated to a small pilot project passed last year.** This program would help a smaller number of families now, but would lay the framework for future expansion of a stronger program that more successfully moves families from welfare to work.

Therefore, **I urge the Committee to reject the proposal to eliminate the JFES pilot and to allocate funds from the proposed \$9 million cut from the TANF line item to fund more support to families struggling to find work and escape poverty.**

Thank you for your time and attention to these important issues.