

March 9, 2012
Judiciary Committee
Testimony of Dorette Barnett in support of
HB 5388: An Act Concerning Court Fees And The Delivery Of Legal Services To The Poor

My name is Dorette Barnett. I am here to support funding for legal aid. Greater Hartford Legal Aid has helped me advocate for appropriate school programs for two of my children, and given me counsel and support in dealing with juvenile court and DCF.

My oldest son, Michael, has significant attention issues, and had emotional and behavioral problems while in school and at home. My legal aid attorney reviewed all of Michael's educational and medical records, represented me at school meetings, and clearly explained to me the special education process, my rights and options for Michael. She helped me to voice my concerns with the school. We worked together to increase supports for Michael and to tailor Michael's program in the public school. Ultimately, Michael's needs were too great for public school and he was placed in a private clinical day program, and later in residential. Throughout this period, my legal aid attorney also assisted me with advocating with DCF for increased supports for Michael through the voluntary services program. I am happy to say that with my tireless efforts, with the support of my legal aid attorney, Michael is now emotionally and behaviorally stable, and thriving in college. He hopes to enter the culinary profession.

My middle daughter, Shaqiea, is now in 11th grade. Throughout elementary school, Shaqiea did very well at school. Her attention and behavioral issues really started to show themselves in middle school and then high school. She repeated Michael's earlier behavior, but also became physically aggressive. My first thought was to get in contact with my legal aid attorney because of our great success with Michael. She stepped in, and through the special education process, Shaqiea was identified as eligible to get special education supports. Through the following school years, we worked together to tailor Shaqiea's public school program to meet her needs. We advocated against excessive discipline against Shaqiea because those discipline methods did little to address Shaqiea's distinct needs. Through this period, Shaqiea also became involved with Juvenile Court and DCF. My legal aid attorney carefully explained this process to me and tried to coordinate services with the school. Shaqiea is now placed in a private clinical day school getting the help she needs. And, I am again optimistic for her future.

I am so grateful for the knowledge and support that my legal aid attorney has given me through the years with both of my children. I believe it will be detrimental to families and children, and the community as a whole, if funding is taken away from legal aid and people in need can't secure legal aid's help. Please support funding for legal aid so they can continue with their important work and help other parents. I am happy to answer any questions that you have. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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