



Testimony of Ellen Small Billard, MSW
CABHN Coordinator, Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut

Human Services Committee
March 1, 2012

In support of Raised Senate Bill 209 An Act Increasing Educational Incentives in the Jobs First Employment Services Program

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak, and members of the Human Services 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. CABHN is sponsored by the Legal Assistance Resource Center of CT. 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 in support of SB 209 An Act Increasing Educational Incentives in the Jobs First Employment Services Program.

This proposal would build on the smaller 100 person pilot program that was mandated last session by the legislature, as well as on the recommendations of a work group convened by the Department of Labor last summer to examine the efficacy of the JFES program.

Specifically, this bill will:

- **Provide vocational education and adult basic education courses leading to a high school diploma** for up to 1,000 participants in the Jobs First Employment Services (JFES) program
- **Make participation in the pilot program an "allowable" activity** under the individual's employment plan, thus enabling them to enroll in such courses
- **Provide up to two six-month extensions on cash assistance benefits for families enrolled in the pilot program**, increasing the amount of time available to complete the courses necessary to obtain a high school diploma. Under current regulations, families are eligible for (and often receive) two 6-month extensions anyway, so this particular component of the pilot program is unlikely to exceed status quo expenditures. (NOTE: To receive extensions, participants will have to remain in compliance with program requirements, have earnings that do not exceed the federal poverty level, and not exceed 60 months total for receipt of cash assistance)

This session is being touted as the "Education Session," and, as a result, significant attention is being given toward closing Connecticut's staggering achievement gap between poor and higher-income school districts. While we fully support the closing of this appalling achievement gap, we also recognize that it is not just important to close the gap for children in school today; it is also important to address the needs of

their parents, many of whom now find themselves without a high school diploma and unable to secure stable jobs that pay a living wage as a result.

These parents still deserve a chance at success.

At any given time, there are approximately 8,000 parents receiving cash assistance (Temporary Family Assistance/TFA) who are enrolled in Jobs First Employment Services -- the job training/education component of Connecticut's family welfare program. The program usually reports around 16,000 total participants each year.

Of these participants, about 49% lack a high school diploma. According to the January 2012 "At-a-Squint" (produced by the Department of Labor), 45% of JFES participants had an 11th grade level of education or lower.

It is hard enough for anyone to find a job during difficult economic times, but it is nearly impossible for someone without a high school diploma.

The JFES participants we have talked to stress the importance of job training and educational opportunities to lifting their family out of poverty.

Unfortunately, for most of these parents, the trainings offered and the assistance received under the current Jobs First program have proven insufficient toward moving them into stable jobs that pay a living wage. They may receive a certificate for completing an available training, but as they will tell you, it's nearly impossible to get a job with just a certificate in lieu of a high school diploma. Others do not even obtain a certificate. In fact, **40% are engaged in only job search activities.** *These activities do not include education or training.* Not only do these job search activities not always result in the acquisition of a job, but also they cut into the amount of time program participants will have remaining to participate in additional training or education opportunities.

A JFES participant from Hartford succinctly summarized the dilemma facing participants under the program's current structure:

"How do you expect people to get a job if they don't have an education? I wanted to go to school and get an education. I did NOT want to receive cash assistance. But I had to care for my child, and I was not able to comply with the Jobs First program if I went to school. *You have to help people get a real education, not just give them certificates for trainings.*"

This bill is an important step toward doing just that: helping parents enrolled in this program get an education, in this case a high school diploma.

Obtaining a high school diploma is the only hope that most will have at escaping poverty and achieving self-sufficiency.

This pilot program will go a long way toward helping 1,000 families in the JFES program obtain high school education credentials that lay the foundation for them to obtain jobs that will lead greater long-term economic success.

I would also urge you not to amend the statute that establishes the 100 person pilot adopted during the 2011 session as this pilot is not in conflict with the new pilot being proposed.

Thank you for your time and consideration to this bill and to the families served by this program.

Ellen Small Billard, MSW
CABHN Coordinator/Legal Assistance Resource Center of CT
esmall@larcc.org
(860) 278 – 5688 x. 208