

***Human Services Committee***

***SB 27 An Act Promoting the Pursuit of Education by Recipients of Assistance***

Submitted by Amy Miller, Program & Public Policy Director, CT Women's Education and Legal Fund  
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I am submitting testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) and the Campaign for a Working Connecticut (CWCT). CWEALF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the personal and professional lives of women, girls and their families. The CWCT is a coalition of advocates, education and training providers, unions, workforce investment boards, and chambers of commerce working together to promote the state's economic competitiveness through the development of sustainable, effective workforce solutions to increase workers' skills and advance families to self-sufficiency.

*I've come here today to urge your support for SB 27 An Act Promoting the Pursuit of Education by Recipients of Assistance.*

For more than the past decade CWEALF has worked with individuals and service providers involved in the Jobs First Employment Services program. What we have consistently witnessed is that people receiving cash assistance want to work. They are seeking educational opportunities that will prepare them for jobs so that they may become self-sufficient. As Connecticut has implemented new programs and designed different strategies to move the welfare population into self-sufficiency, by necessity, the system has to be flexible in its approach. This bill expands the range of opportunities for participants to increase their skills and employability. Individuals are unlikely to gain self-sufficiency, without the right combination of education, training, and supports.

Having a high school diploma is no longer a guarantee for a good job. According to "Meeting the Challenge: The Dynamics of Poverty in CT," women and men in Connecticut who lack a high school diploma can expect to be "very poor," 72% and 67% of the time, respectively. Vocational training and post-secondary education are becoming more important for securing self-sufficient employment in these economic times. In fact, 66 percent of jobs created by 2018 will require at least some post-secondary education<sup>i</sup>. Without basic skills such as reading, math and English proficiency, jobs with high wages, health benefits and room for advancement are out of reach for Connecticut's poor population.<sup>ii</sup>

According to the September, 2012 "At a Squint" produced by the CT Department of Labor, only 13% of the participants in the JFES system have education beyond the high school level. And "no high school diploma" is cited as a barrier to employment for 23% of the current caseload. Additionally, this report shows that 45% of participants are involved in job search activities only. While having individuals in job search activities helps Connecticut achieve the federal workforce participation rate, it does nothing to ensure people receiving cash assistance acquire the education they need for the current middle skills jobs available so they can get off and stay off public assistance. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010, female full-time wage and salary workers aged 25 and older with only a high school diploma had median usual weekly earnings of \$543. This represented 80 percent of the earnings for

women with an associate's degree (\$677), and 55 percent of those for women with a bachelor's degree or higher (\$986).<sup>iii</sup>

For Connecticut to have a higher percentage of economically self-sufficient citizens—permitting more access to education for the poorest citizens must be a priority. The large number of workers and families who lack economic security shows the need for state and local policy to promote post-secondary education and job training. Having post-secondary training, an Associates or Bachelor's degree increases earning potential and employment opportunities for men and women. For example, the likelihood of women with a B.A. or an advanced degree earns an income above the state median is 68%.<sup>iv</sup> Adults with higher levels of education are more likely to participate in the labor market than those adults with little or no education. Not only are persons with higher educational attainment more likely to be active in the labor market, they are more likely to have jobs that pay above the poverty level, have health benefits, and more job security. Improving basic skills and promoting post-secondary education will only help Connecticut families reach self-sufficiency.

While supporting this bill, it is necessary to point out that the current twenty-one month time-limit allotted for stabilizing ones family and pursuing educational and training activities is not sufficient to achieve adequate levels of training or education. There is a high demand in Connecticut for middle-skill workers, an educational and training level commensurate with an associate's degree. Even if an associate's degree is achieved in the assumed two years, which is a struggle even for some individuals in the most promising of situations, that still does not fit within the current time limit. We must be careful to align all aspects of our policies with the goals we wish to achieve.

Supporting SB 27 will be an investment in the future of Connecticut's families, as well as businesses and our economic prosperity. A report by Brookings shows that the better educated a metropolitan area is, the shorter time it will take to improve during poor economic times because these regions are likely to have more job creation.<sup>v</sup> Reports in Connecticut have shown that businesses across our state need workers with basic skills in reading and math, transferable skills such as problem-solving, team work and decision-making and specific occupational skills which meet the technical needs of industry. For example, "(a)ccording to the DECD, Connecticut manufacturers have approximately 1,000 job openings for which they cannot find suitable candidates."<sup>vi</sup>

Without a multi-pronged approach including basic skill and language instruction, higher education, or vocational training in addition to work supports, we will not address the needs of JFES recipients or businesses in the state. This bill provides an opportunity for the state to support workers in their efforts to upgrade their skills to meet the demands of the labor market and to obtain employment that will support their families.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Basic Economic Security Tables for Connecticut, Wider Opportunities for Women, 2012*

<sup>ii</sup> *The Basic Economic Security Tables for Connecticut, Wider Opportunities for Women, 2012*

<sup>iii</sup> *Women in the Labor Force: A Data Book, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2011*

<sup>iv</sup> *Meeting the Challenge: The Dynamics of Poverty in Connecticut, Connecticut Association for Community Action and Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis, pg. 27, January 2013.*

<sup>v</sup> *Education, Job Openings, and Unemployment in Metropolitan America, Rothwell, Jonathan, Brookings, August 2012.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Connecticut Manufacturing: Building on the Past, Creating Our Future, Connecticut Business and Industry Association, 2012*