

Legal Assistance Resource Center

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**Testimony before the Human Services Committee
in support of Committee Bill 27 – An Act Promoting the Pursuit of Education by
Recipients of Assistance
and in opposition to RB 855 – An Act Revising Certain Social Services Statutes**

by Jane McNichol, Executive Director
February 14, 2013

Good afternoon. I am **Jane McNichol**, Executive Director of the Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut, the advocacy and support center for legal services programs in the state. We represent the interests of very-low income residents of the state. LARCC also convenes the Welfare Working Group, a group of about 25 advocates on welfare issues. Since 1996, the Welfare Working Group has monitored the federal TANF program and the state's family welfare program and its impact on low-income families with children in the state.

I am here to speak in support of Committee Bill 27, which would encourage the pursuit of education in Connecticut's Jobs First program, our version of the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and in opposition to RB 855, An Act Revising Certain Social Services Statutes, which would limit the ability of the legislature and the public to monitor DSS actions in significant areas.

Committee Bill 27 – An Act Promoting the Pursuit of Education by Recipients of Assistance

This bill acknowledges the importance of education as a pathway to self-sufficiency for families in Connecticut's welfare program. It builds on ideas generated in this Committee over the past two years. The importance of education and training is generally acknowledged in national research. But, increasingly, we can look to state research and experience to demonstrate the need for education and training for parents in the Jobs First Employment Services (JFES) program.

In 2011, the Department of Labor (DOL) convened a work group to make recommendations on improving the JFES program. The report of that group acknowledges the high percentage of JFES parents who do not have a high school diploma and the barrier to employment that this poses. Last year, with a small amount of funding from the legislature, DOL and DSS implemented a short-term pilot to provide education and training to about 50 JFES participants. Participants seized the opportunity to gain education and training eagerly and made significant gains in literacy.

2012 also saw the publication of a study by Kenneth A. Couch, Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Connecticut on the Jobs First program. This study followed about 9,500 families in the JFES program over 3 years. The study is entitled "Jobs First Employment Services and Temporary Aid to Needy Families in Connecticut" and is available through DOL.

Among the conclusions of the study: **“having an 8th grade education or less or being a high school dropout has a negative impact on the probability of employment. Having an 8th grade education or less reduces the probability of being employed by 16.1%. Having more than 8 but less than 12 years of education similarly reduces the probability of employment by 17.8%.”**

The pursuit of education and training is, unfortunately, not encouraged by the design of the federal TANF block grant program. Because of this, Connecticut has historically been reluctant to encourage the pursuit of education and training in the JFES program for fear that we would not meet the federal work participation rate. However, we have a history of meeting and exceeding that rate.

This bill encourages DSS, and DOL, to recognize

- the needs of JFES participants for education to enable them to find decent jobs,
- the state’s need for an educated workforce and
- our historic ability to meet and exceed federal requirements and

design a program that provides more of what participants and the state need – education that leads to employment.

Both the federal and state administrations are moving to open up new ways to address JFES participants’ needs. Last summer, the federal government indicated that it was willing to waive certain aspects of the federal TANF program for states which wanted to design alternative paths to employment. Governor Malloy has proposed allocating \$747,500 in SFY 2014 and \$555,000 in SFY 2015 to DOL for “alternative and innovative strategies” in JFES. **These are small but important steps which the passage of Committee Bill 27 will encourage. We urge support of this bill.**

RB 855 – An Act Revising Certain Social Services Statutes

This bill seeks to relieve DSS of certain reporting and review requirements in relation to

- Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) (Sec. 1),
- Medicaid waiver applications (Sec. 2), and
- Social Service and Community Service Block Grants (Sec. 3).

Legal Services advocates are particularly concerned about the proposed changes in the LIHEAP and Medicaid waiver procedures. Our concerns about LIHEAP are articulated more fully in the testimony of Shirley Bergert of Connecticut Legal Services, which was submitted electronically and in writing.

Section 2 of this bill proposes to remove the requirement that the final versions of proposed Medicaid waiver applications be reviewed and approved by the Human Services and Appropriations Committees if the submission of the waiver is mandated in legislation.

This is a startling and disturbing proposal. **The system for legislative review of Medicaid waiver applications has developed over years as a mechanism for continued legislative oversight of the Medicaid program and the efficient development of the state budget.** As the

process now works, in the development and adoption of the state budget, the legislature may authorize in very general terms the submission of a waiver that effects significant changes in the state's Medicaid program. In the course of discussing the proposed waiver with the federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and developing the detailed waiver for submission to CMS, DSS may be required to make some changes to the proposal as originally envisioned in the budget negotiations.

Legislators retain their control over the state Medicaid program by delegating to the Human Services and Appropriations Committee the power to review and approve or disapprove the final waiver application. In the absence of that chance to review the final application, a detailed waiver description would have to be developed at the same time as the budget and incorporated into statutory language for approval by the whole legislature.

We urge that you reject this proposed change in the Medicaid waiver review process.