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Testimony before the Human Services Committee on
Governor's Bill 5052,
An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations for Human Services Programs
and Raised Bills 5137 and 106

by Jane McNichol, Executive Director
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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.

I am here today primarily to voice **strong opposition to Sections 5 and 6 of Governor's Bill 5052, An Act Implementing the Governor's Recommendations for Human Services Programs.** These sections remove the requirement that the cash assistance available through the Temporary Family Assistance, SAGA cash assistance and State Supplement programs be increased yearly through the adoption of a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).

The proposed change would be not effective until July 1, 2015 so it has no impact on the 2014-2015 budget year.

The language change makes a COLA adjustment subject to the discretion of the Commissioner and requires that it be "within available appropriations". A COLA increase must be a budgeted item that can be incorporated into benefit amounts on an on-going basis. It cannot be provided "within available appropriations". The effect of this change will be to eliminate the possibility of a COLA unless explicitly authorized annually in an adopted budget.

This COLA requirement has been in place for many years. In all but four of those years, the adopted budget did not include a COLA for these programs. The Temporary Family Assistance and SAGA cash benefits are woefully inadequate and stagnant. Currently, in most of the state, a family of three receives a maximum of $588 a month, or $7,056 a year, in TFA cash assistance. The SAGA cash benefit is $216 a month or $2,592 a year.

We should be increasing these grants and then providing an annual cost of living increase to families and individuals eligible for these programs. At the very least, we should continue to require that we review the state's ability to provide increases during every budget cycle. **We urge that the changes proposed in Sections 5 and 6 of this bill be rejected.**

I also want to **express support for** two important bills being heard today:

- **Raised Bill 5137, An Act Concerning the Eligibility of Children Enrolled in the HUSKY Plan.** This bill would require the state to adopt "continuous eligibility" for children in HUSKY A and B. This is a state option in the Medicaid and CHIP programs

that guarantees coverage for a year, even if a child would otherwise lose coverage due to changes in circumstances such as income or family size. In addition to providing continuity of health care for the child, this change would simplify administration of the Medicaid program for DSS. Given the many delays in processing documents and applications, we should embrace sensible program enhancements that eliminate work for DSS. This bill does not propose continuous eligibility for adults. We should consider that policy as well, although the cost for implementing that policy may be higher than adopting this proposal for children.

- **Raised Bill 106, An Act Concerning Improving Employment Opportunities Through Education.** This bill acknowledges the importance of education as a pathway to self-sufficiency for families in Connecticut's welfare program. The bill requires that DSS and DOL increase opportunities for education for parents in the Jobs First Employment Services program, while recognizing the need for the state to meet federally mandated work participation rates. Connecticut has historically limited access to education but has met and exceeded work participation rates. Education is a key component to achieving financial stability. We need to reflect this in our JFES program.

Thank you for your work on these important issues.