

CONNECTICUT LEGAL RIGHTS PROJECT, INC.

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Statement for Appropriations Committee Public Hearing February 27, 2015

REGARDING THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED BIENNIAL BUDGET
Opposed to: cuts in the DSS budget and provisions regarding DCF/CSSD

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and other members of the Committee:

My name is Kathy Flaherty. I am the Associate Executive Director Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP), a legal services organization that advocates for low-income individuals in institutions and in the community who have mental health conditions. We support initiatives that integrate individuals into the community. Our clients utilize the services of the Department of Social Services. For this reason, we are against the proposed cuts in the Governor's budget.

We oppose the proposed cut to the cost of living allowance for people who receive State Supplement benefits. The population eligible for these benefits includes those who are the most vulnerable and have the lowest income. To not pass along Social Security COLA increases, but instead change the calculation so that their state benefits are reduced when their federal benefits go up, is a profound lack of recognition of the fact that the state is taking away their ability to meet their increased needs as reflected by the cost of living allowance – indeed, setting them on a path where they will only get farther and farther behind.

Our clients often have difficulty accessing services because they are not able to find providers who accept Medicaid reimbursement. The existing Medicaid rates in Connecticut are already low in comparison to neighboring states, don't reflect the true cost of care, and are a deterrent to provider participation. We know that raising reimbursement rates increases provider participation, as demonstrated by the increases for primary care providers and dentists. Lowering the rates will

reduce access to care, and probably increase costs for more expensive hospital services. In addition, it is irresponsible for the Governor to delegate the decision as to which rates will be decreased to a state agency, the Department of Social Services, with no requirement for review or oversight of their decisions, and no public input.

We oppose the defunding of the federal demonstration plan to integrate care for dually eligible citizens – seniors and people with disabilities whose medical needs are great and resources are few. The state has invested a significant amount of money and time in developing proposals to improve health outcomes, which ultimately saves the state money. The governor’s budget would also require these individuals to fully bear the cost of their Medicare Part D prescription co-pays. Many of these individuals take multiple medications, and they live on fixed incomes – they do not have additional money in their limited budgets for these expenses. People will have to choose between getting a prescription necessary for their health and using their money to meet their other basic needs. They should not be forced to make this choice.

We oppose the elimination of funding allocated to DSS under the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) for legal services. Legal services provides advocacy to the state’s most vulnerable clients. This work should be supported.

This budget is balanced on the backs of the state’s most vulnerable clients. Better choices can and must be made. Reducing funding by 10% for “various programs” (Services for Persons with Disabilities, Community Services, Safety Net Services, and Nutrition Assistance) when the beneficiaries of these programs are the state’s neediest is not a reflection of Connecticut’s values. Closing the Torrington office combined with cutting DSS staffing levels, when the agency is already under-staffed and clients seeking assistance wait an hour or more on the phones to talk to someone and paperwork is not always processed in a timely fashion, indicates a lack of caring for the challenges faced by people needing help from DSS. Connecticut can and must do better.

Finally, we know that the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services has been able to collaborate effectively with the Judicial Branch Court Services Support Division (CSSD) to help clients achieve positive outcomes. That system is not broken. It does not need to be “fixed” by splitting the funds and redistributing them to DCF and DOC.

Thank you for time and attention to these concerns.

