



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



Commission on Children

**Testimony before the Human Services Committee on Proposed S.B. No. 895
Submitted by Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director
Connecticut Commission on Children
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Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie and Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the CT Commission on Children and am here today to speak on behalf of Raised Bill 895, An Act Concerning Temporary Family Assistance.

This bill begins to change our welfare law from 1996. President Clinton announced that he would change welfare as we know it almost 20 years ago. States were able to design systems, within federal parameters, that offered options up to 60 months. Connecticut designed a system that went to 21 months.

This last decade, we faced the Great Recession, 35,000 children in our state fell into poverty, our economy shuddered and we are now slowly seeing improvements. But our welfare law did not change to accompany the changes in the economic landscape and what was happening to families in Connecticut.

Connecticut has many families struggling to make ends meet; some who never thought they would become poor. They spent all their assets while unemployed. The ALICE report, led by the United Way here and in a handful of other states, calls this asset limited, income constrained, employed families.

One in four adults in our state has earnings below a cost of living threshold. Despite working hard, these households struggle to make ends meet. Some fall into the rabbit hole of poverty and end up in our welfare system. And the poor have become the chronically poor. Their rabbit hole deepened.

What was well -intended, had an unintended impact. Our TANF recipients had 21 months to get their lives together. But when they left TANF, they did not have skills and there were no jobs. So many became homeless with their children. Homelessness costs in dignity, dollars and school performance.

So it is time to look at our welfare law and update what would best help those in short term poverty move forward and those in chronic poverty move forward, to see welfare as a bus stop on the way to part or full-time employment.

The Department of Labor and the Department of Social Services pulled a strong group together of practitioners, policy leaders, families and program analysts to look at our TANF law. We went through

every component, without fanfare, like scientists. We concluded together that something had to be done to change the direction in our state's welfare practice.

We saw the goal as less to punish the poor than to help people who found themselves suddenly poor with a new skill or education that would assist them out of poverty into a sustainable job – once we had jobs in our state. We also sought to keep children out of poverty as much as possible. Raised bill 895 begins to address many of our consensus items for action. These include softening of cliffs as one enters the job market, support for acquisition of marketable skills, development of a social work model, a shift to competitiveness for every potential low-income adult worker.

Our findings were supported by national scholars, poverty experts and federal staff members who came to a welfare forum at the LOB this year, designed by the Legist lure and the Executive branch. We discussed trends and reforms to bolster competitiveness. . The National Conference of State Legislators joined us and shared best practices in successful states as well as hybrid training models such as I-Best.

RB 895 captures many of these findings as it:

- Diminishes the cliff edge, so we do not see people off poverty and back into poverty like a turnstile at a department store. It offers a 90 dollar disregard of earned income and the cost of child care for needy families' income above the payment standard in determining applicable family income.
- Includes adult education and workforce training as eligible employment participation activities. This helps adults in poverty complete high school or a high school equivalency program.
- Helps adults in poverty acquire advanced and technical skills to increase employability and sustainable employment by pausing time limits while acquiring technical skills to achieve sustainable employment.
- Helps adults in poverty enroll in higher education courses including completion of an associate's degree or an apprenticeship degree by pausing time limits during this skills acquisition function.
- Creates a lock box for TANF funds by moving the dollars from the General Fund to DSS to be administered solely by the Department of Social Services, with the authority to assure oversight of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.
- Begins a social work paradigm and context by informing parents of existing resources when they are preparing to leave TANF.
- Stops punishment for the family size of adults living in poverty. We penalized parents if they became pregnant while on TANF. Their support for the new birth child was less.

Poverty itself – independent of family structure and parents' educational level – has severe and long-term effects on children's cognitive abilities and school achievement, and it limits children's chances to

achieve economic self-sufficiency as adults. So many families in our state continue to feel the effects of the Great Recession. Eighty thousand children under the age of five live in low-income households.

Fifteen percent of Connecticut families with children have a head of household without a high school diploma. Importantly, children's readiness for school (or the lack thereof) can be predicted from these parental circumstances. Employers also suffer as more than \$60 billion is lost in productivity each year by American businesses due to employees' lack of basic skills.

Our TANF model has not been a social work model but a jump off the train fast model that did not really help with education, employability or sustainable family stability. This bill begins to transform TANF for the 21st century.

Thank you.