

Legal Assistance Resource Center

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Testimony submitted to the Human Services Committee in support of RB 895, An Act Concerning Temporary Family Assistance

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 policy advocacy branch of the legal services network in the state. We represent the interests of very-low income residents of the state.

I am here to support RB 895, An Act Concerning Temporary Family Assistance. This bill continues a very important re-examination of Connecticut's family welfare program which was begun under the auspices of the Child Poverty and Prevention Council last year. About a year ago, the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) convened work groups to look at the provisions of our family welfare programs, Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) administered by DSS and Jobs First Employment Services (JFES) administered by DOL. These programs replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children and are Connecticut's version of welfare reform. We have not undertaken a serious review of these programs since they were adopted and implemented in the mid-1990's. We welcome this opportunity to begin the conversation about and redesign of the family welfare program.

Joanne Gibau of New Haven Legal Assistance Association and I served on the Work Group organized by DSS to review the TFA provisions. A major concern in the Work Group was the short time limits in Connecticut's program. According to the research provided by DSS, Connecticut has the strictest time limits in the country. 36 states have a 60 month time limit and three have no time limit.

There was particular concern from both the DOL and DSS work groups that parents in TFA families cannot get the education and training they need to get jobs in the short amount of time benefits are available to them.

Several provisions in this bill will address this issue and allow parents to take the steps they need to take to get jobs and support their families.

Section 1(b) adds two new categories of exemptions from time limits for parents who are successfully pursuing needed education and training. The exemptions will allow TFA parents to pursue education and training without using up all their families' eligibility for cash assistance. The exemption from time limits ends when the parent completes the approved education or training program.

Section 1(c)(2) is designed to encourage work by ending the severe income cliffs faced by families when a parent goes to work and earns a small amount of money. In our current program, at the end of 21 months, or after the first extension of benefits, if a parent is earning more than the amount of the cash benefits the family is receiving (plus an allowance for work expenses), the family is ineligible for an extension.

For example: In most of the state, a family of three receives a maximum of \$597 a month in TFA cash assistance. If a mother of two gets a job in the first 21 months that the family is receiving assistance and earns \$700 a month, the family income will be \$1,297. When the family applies for an extension of cash assistance, they will be ineligible because the \$700 in earned income is greater than the \$597 in cash assistance they are receiving. The family's income will fall from \$1,297 a month to \$700 a month.

Under the provisions of Section 1(c)(2), this family's income would decline more gradually. The family would be eligible for \$398 a month (2/3rds of the regular benefit amount) in cash assistance for six months and then for \$199 a month (1/3rd of the regular benefit amount) for the next six months.

NOTE: the language of the bill makes this gradual step-down of benefits available only at the end of the first 21 months of assistance. To encourage parents to pursue employment, **the language should be modified as proposed below to make this step-down in benefits available to working parents after extensions as well:**

(NEW) (2) In addition to any extension available pursuant to subsection (1) to a family who is subject to time-limited benefits, the Commissioner shall grant two six month extensions to a family in which the caretaker relative has made a good faith effort to comply with the requirements of the program, has become employed while receiving cash assistance and applies for the extension available under this subsection at the end of the family's initial 21 months of assistance or at the end of a six-month extension granted under subsection (c) (1).

I urge you to support these proposals and the other provisions of RB 895. These changes will begin to make our family welfare program one that enables parents to support their families while moving toward meaningful employment.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues.