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**February 27, 2014 Public Hearing Testimony before the
Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee**

Governor's Budget Bill

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Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members, and Members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Michelle James and I am the Executive Director of the Community Action Agency of Western Connecticut, Inc., the Community Action Agency (CAA) that serves Greater Danbury. **I am here to voice our strong opposition to the elimination of the Human Services Infrastructure (HSI) Community Action Program line from the Department of Social Services budget.**

As you know, Connecticut's Community Action Network provides basic services such as food, shelter, heating assistance, and child care to the state's low and moderate income communities. We provide these services utilizing a multi-generational, customer-focused, integrated service delivery system called the Human Services Infrastructure (HSI). **The elimination of the HSI funds, the "core" funding for Community Action Agencies (CAAs), will severely impact our ability to help Connecticut's families when they need us most.**

HSI dollars have proven to play a significant role in the delivery of services to our customers. The philosophy behind HSI has allowed staff to help customers beyond the delivery of one program or one service. By looking at the whole family and addressing ALL needs, staff has time and time again connected families to resources within our agency, within the community, and within the state. Through follow-up and connecting to other providers, customers have truly received supportive customer-driven services that have impacted them greatly.

This past summer, our staff was able to help a young woman obtain full-time employment and to enroll as a student at Naugatuck Valley Community College. Maria* needed assistance with job searching, resume writing, taxes and energy assistance, all of which was provided by my staff. Maria was able to sign up for a C.N.A course and staff worked with Naugatuck Valley to secure financial aid for classes. She has since completed C.N.A., secured employment and is a part time student.

My staff have helped young women who are living on the street, or on a friend's couch. They make phone calls, write letters, connect with local providers and work tirelessly to get people the services they need. My staff are available to help customers apply for DSS services and assess what other barriers might exist and



then connect them to people and resources. Without HSI dollars, individuals will have to wait in long lines at DSS or be forced to apply for services at home on a computer they don't have. Who will look at the whole picture of the family and address other barriers? Who will inform the young woman applying for food stamps on a computer in the library that there are multiple pantries in town and the hours of operation? Who will let that woman know she can file her taxes for free, or connect her to an employment training course, help her with her resume or inform her about energy assistance?

Currently, a young woman who lives with her older sisters and her niece came to our office looking for assistance. With very little income in the household, this high school senior worries about her future and how she can help support her family. My staff are working with her on budgeting, financial counseling, and securing assistance to sign up for an employment training course. Because she reached out to our agency, staff will likely make connections with her two older sisters as well, helping the household with energy assistance or childcare for the niece. This is the significance of HSI dollars.

Since the fall, my agency has provided interim services in both Stamford and Norwalk catchment areas using exclusively HSI dollars. Prior to this arrangement, the needs of low-income people in those areas were not being met. Now, we are booked all day, seeing clients, providing case management, completing applications, assisting with housing, citizenship applications, and job searching, and making connections to other providers in the community.

In November, my staff helped a middle aged woman, Lori* who had been a victim of domestic violence with many emotional and financial barriers, including a history of suicidal attempts. She came to our office in Stamford seeking assistance with her Section 8 voucher. My staff helped her with location from Hartford to Stamford, connected her with counseling, and employment. Today she comes to see my staff, with a hopeful attitude, working towards self-sufficiency.

HSI dollars are used by my agency to support staff who provide case management services, who provide direct services to customers whether it be food stamp applications, housing, education, childcare applications, etc. HSI funds our food pantry, diaper program, and provides case management services to our parents at our early childhood program. Without these dollars, we may be forced to close our food pantry and the diaper program. HSI dollars also support data collection and reporting functions, which are crucial to the network and the state. Our systems allow unduplicated counts and tell the story of poverty in Connecticut. HSI dollars support training for staff to ensure high quality service delivery. HSI dollars support staff who greet customers, answer phones, make appointments, provide referrals and answer questions about program requirements.

Despite the huge impact this cut will have on my agency's budget, and the inevitable reduction in staff as well as loss of jobs for my employees, I worry most about the people that we serve. We see so many people with so many barriers that we are overwhelmed. As it is now, we cannot meet the demand. My staff are fully booked all day, every day, and our phone continues to ring. Agencies, including our local DSS office, send clients our way. Because they know that my staff doesn't just help fill out a food stamp application and send



someone on their way. My staff are trained and expected to provide holistic services, and can not only complete an application, but assist with housing, childcare, employment, energy and healthcare barriers. Our customers have so many needs and so many barriers, and are often sent from one agency to another without all of their needs being met. I have seen too often the relief on our customers face when they leave an appointment with my staff, knowing someone is available to help them and there is some hope. Without HSI dollars within my agency, I know that the needs and number of people in poverty will only grow larger.

I am available for any questions or comments that you may have and can be reached at 203.744.4700 x109 or via email at michelle.james@caawc.org.

Sincerely,

Michelle H. James
Executive Director

*Names have been changed