

**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee**  
**February 27, 2015**  
**In Opposition to the Governor's Proposed Budget Cuts for Fiscal Year 2016-17**  
**Barbara Albert, Hartford CT**

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Barbara Albert, Hartford renter, registered voter, advocate, and activist for human rights. I am a member of Keep the Promise Coalition, Caring Families Coalition, as well as others. I am on Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security Disability. I have multiple chronic medical challenges, including mental illnesses. I used to work before my illnesses became too much. I do volunteer when able.

I am here to testify on the Governor's proposed biennial budget.

I am opposed to the discriminatory proposed cuts to the Department of Social Services, particularly towards those of us who are "Aged, Blind, and Disabled." Seriously? The Cost of Living Adjustment? Again? Just as wrong as only "Aged, Blind, and Disabled" having an asset test. In my opinion, just as discriminatory as DSS Administration telling us at Caring Families Coalition that people with disabilities and/or special needs are REQUIRED for us to call before coming in.

DSS needs to be prepared to meet basic human needs for ALL human beings. I do not need extra help with the reinforcement of "I don't matter." I am not my illnesses. First and foremost, I am a human being. I would really like to be able to feel this.

Please remember, everyone is eligible to become ill, just as everyone is eligible to become older. Just as a range of mental disorders effect 1 in 4 in any given year.

The Medicaid provider rates? Limited access to services—already is. Paying "out of pocket" for some of my medical needs, I often need to decide what else I can make do without.

I urge you to restore these harmful cuts to ensure crucial services are available to the residents of Connecticut and for those in need.

Attached are more Caring Families Coalition notes with responses, or lack thereof, from another meeting with DSS.

Thank you very much for listening and for your attention to these important services and supports.





### DSS Communications Issues and Proposed Solutions

1. Issue: Upon entering the DSS office, one is not aware of where to go for the different needs. At times there is a long wait to get to the window for an issue that can be solved quickly.

Solution: DSS could develop a Kiosk system similar to the Social Security office that will direct people to the appropriate windows. DSS could also have an information desk like the one at DMV and other services that can direct people to the appropriate location or can answer quick questions. This can reduce wait times.

Summary of DSS Response: DSS stated they already made site visits to the DMV and Social Security Office, and are currently evaluating the system. They have researched it, but no further action or decisions have been made.

\*CFC is still disappointed that DSS does not have a system set up for persons with Disabilities and special needs when they arrive in person. CFC was told that persons with disabilities and specials should call ahead before arriving at the office.

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2. Issue: The redetermination letter does not clearly state which program you are redetermining for and this causes confusion with the clients when receiving the letter.

Solution: The letter should clearly state which program is up for redetermination so that the proper information and paperwork can be submitted.

Summary of DSS Response: DSS agreed with this issue and stated they have updated the letter. Commissioner Bremby stated that they are not in charge of all the distribution locations. The paperwork comes from different contracted locations. Commissioner Bremby stated he will look into the issue. Upon reviewing an application that was sent to one of our members in March, Commissioner Bremby and other DSS officials were surprised that the application was outdated and the version that was sent was last reviewed in 2007. Commissioner Bremby stated that he will develop an engagement strategy with all the partners to use proper documents. Commissioner Bremby mentioned there were several work items to be addressed.

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3. Issue: The DSS website is difficult to navigate and it's hard to find the proper paperwork. (Redetermination, budget sheet, etc.)

Solution: Set up a Forms and other Paperwork Tab on the homepage that links directly to all the necessary paperwork.

Summary of DSS Response: Commissioner Bremby reported that two months prior, the Governor stated that the structure for the state websites will be updated. He will get back to us and thought it was a good suggestion. DSS stated they were working on a instructional video that will guide users through the website.

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4. Issue: Callers are experiencing long wait times and are using up most of their state cell phone minutes while on hold with the Call Center

Solution: DSS needs to have a toll free 1-800 number for consumers to call at no charge. DSS should also develop a call back system like the unemployment office that calls back when workers are available. DSS needs to have a location on the internet where consumers can provide their information for a call back

Summary of DSS Response: George Chamberlain from DSS said that call wait times had dropped to 20 minutes on that morning. They are in the process of finishing up a backlog that had previously contributed to the long call wait times. Astread mentioned that a 1-800 number existed for persons who are disabled and have special needs. Disabled and special needs person should call ahead to make arrangements.

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5. Issue: DSS workers are often rude and disrespectful to clients.

Solution: DSS should offer sensitivity training to all DSS staff. These Trainings should include suggestions and real life experiences from constituents.

Summary of DSS Response: Bremby stated that from talking to workers, he has observed a culture of service and motivated employees. He stated employees are frustrated with system and operational issues.

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6. Issue: DSS automatically generates letters to people up for redetermination even after participants submit the letters in advance of the deadline. This makes consumers feel threatened and unsure if their services are in danger. After this confusion, ~~constituents~~ <sup>clients</sup> have to take time to go to the office or make calls to find out if they are all set.

Solution: DSS should create a communication system where people could be removed from the mailing list prior to unnecessary letters being sent.

\*Was addressed during issue number 2.

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7. Issue: When DSS sends out a notice that paperwork has not been received, they do not resend the necessary paperwork.

Solution: If DSS sends out a letter that the necessary paperwork has not been received from a prior notice, they should resend the paperwork in case it was lost in transit.

Summary of DSS Response: Commissioner Bremby stated that the letters are automatically generated and sent out because the 2 systems don't communicate with each other. In 2015, the new system will be able to correct this issues.

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8. Issue: There is a disconnect between Access Health CT and DSS and consumers don't know which is the appropriate place to apply for benefits. Workers from DSS send people to Access Health CT and workers from Access Health CT send people to DSS. It is unclear to consumers who is responsible for the application process.

Solution: Provide clear documentation to consumers stating who is responsible.

DSS Response: Commissioner Bremby mentioned that this happens frequently. Commissioner Bremby meets with Access Health CT and the Contractors and are trying to have an integrated system. Some things are handled by Access Health and some things are handled by DSS. According to Commissioner Bremby, Access Health was implemented so quickly that DSS was unable to keep up with their new system. DSS is still trying to play catch up to the system. When the new system is finally upgraded, we can expect that DSS workers will understand their roles as well as Access Health's role and vice versa.

\*CFC is still unsure of the answer to this question.

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9. Issue: Workers and community partners contact the call center and are told that they can only address one client issue at a time. This cause workers and community partners to have to hang up and call back again. This creates unnecessary wait times for issues and questions that can be solved quickly.

Solution: DSS should develop a system whereby community partners could access DSS staff without going through the call center. DSS should not limit the amount of clients' issues being addressed.

Summary of DSS Response: According to DSS, they already have a system implemented that is working. Community partners need to call DSS and identify who they are and what organization they are from. The worker should send a form for them to fill out and mail back and the next time they call they should be in the system. When they make the call if it is one

or two clients the issue can be addressed at the spot. However, if there are more clients a list of clients names and issues should be faxed and it would be handled on the spot.

\*DSS at a previous meeting stated they did not want information faxed to the department because it was a violation of HIPAA. Workers and community partners are expected to fax a list of clients and their issues. We are disappointed at the contradictory response and that still remains in violation of HIPAA.

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10. Issue: DSS consumers are receiving notification letters from DSS as short as 2 days before or after the deadline, without enough time to be reviewed.

Solution: Letters could be sent out at least a week or two in advance. This will provide an appropriate amount of time for consumers to respond and submit their information.

Summary of DSS Response: DSS had no idea that it was occurring and that they will address immediately.