The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, Inc.

Testimony of Rev. Cass L. Shaw, CEO and President, The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport
IN OPPOSITION TO H.B. 6824, AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2017, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFORE AND OTHER PROVISIONS RELATED TO REVENUE

To the members of the Human Services subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Reverend Cass Shaw and I am the CEO and President of the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport. I am testifying in opposition of the Governor's budget cuts to the Department of Social Services as the impact will be strongly felt among Bridgeport's population.

Hunger Outreach represents one branch of services offered by the Council. We oversee and allocate funds to thirty-nine feeding programs in the Greater Bridgeport area. Our network of food pantries and soup kitchens last year distributed approximately 2,640,698 meals to 20,000 people on a monthly basis. Although the economy is in recovery, residents in our area have yet to benefit from the improvement and continue to need supplemental food to keep from going hungry. The Council regards its mission beyond providing any calories to people in need; we are striving to ensure that all residents in our area eat a balanced, healthful diet.

We know that federally funded food assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC, and the state-sponsored CT NAP are effective tools to put health-supportive foods in the hands of those who need them most. As with most low-income populations, residents in our area suffer disproportionately from diet-related diseases, diseases which are an economic strain to them, the City, and the State. Food assistance programs and the healthy products that CT NAP brings to our area food pantries and soup kitchens are <u>essential</u> in our fight to make our communities healthy and productive.

However, getting eligible people enrolled in these assistance programs is greatly hampered by logjams in the DSS system. Despite the modernization of practices, the Department still cannot process applications in a timely manner. In Bridgeport alone, 50% of eligible SNAP recipients are not enrolled in the program. The Council and its network rely heavily on organizations such as End Hunger CT! to inform our residents of the feeding options available to them and assist them with pre-screening and following up with the DSS. End Hunger CT! in particular offers training sessions to non-profits such as ourselves on how to prescreen on site, a service that creates a much larger network of people in our area trained to help the un-enrolled but eligible. With their help, we are expecting to see a decline in the number of eligible residents without benefits. However, with these budget cuts, we are sure to see the number exceed 50% in the coming year.

Our Network relies heavily on CT NAP. Cutting this program, which provides foods of high nutritional value at a low-price, would dramatically reduce the purchasing power of our programs at the CT Food Bank. As it is, food pantries and soup kitchens struggle to provide food to the many needy residents in our area as food prices continue to rise. We leverage food rescue opportunities both directly with food retail outlets and through partnerships with non-profits such as Community Plates; encourage healthy food donation drives; and provide opportunities for Network members to buy directly from distributors

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to cut costs. However, the CT Food Bank is the backbone of our food supply, offering the most effective and efficient way to keep healthy food in the hands of those who need it most. **A reduction of CT NAP would most assuredly result in a dramatic decrease in food available, in particular healthy options.**

I hope that you will reconsider these cuts to DSS and restore funding to these very necessary agencies and programs in our area.