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**TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC.
FOR THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE**

APRIL 1, 2015

**IN OPPOSITION TO S. B. NO 951
AN ACT CONSOLIDATING CRIMINAL JUSTICE, JUVENILE, AND
FAMILY SERVICE PROGRAMS**

Thank you Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, and members of the Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to testify. This testimony is being submitted on behalf of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). My name is Agata Raszczyk-Lawska and I am the Managing Attorney of CLS' Children-at-Risk unit. Legal services attorneys have been representing low-income families and students across the state on educational and child protection issues for over 30 years.

CLS strongly opposes the proposed move of Court Support Services Division's (CSSD) juvenile justice functions to the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

CSSD led a number of progressive moves in the last few years that received national attention due to their successes. The implementation of Raise the Age (providing for 16 and 17 year olds to be moved from the adult criminal system to the juvenile justice system), the increase in the availability and variety of therapies and programming for court-involved youth, and the demonstrated commitment to data-driven planning and outcomes are just a few of the reasons CSSD has achieved reductions in juvenile recidivism and juvenile incarceration. The numerous success stories coming from our client children who benefitted from CSSD involvement prove that CSSD should remain in its current incarnation and continue to receive adequate funding.

CSSD is currently handling the bulk, about 97%, of juvenile justice services, while DCF's primary function is with regard to child protection. DCF's juvenile justice expertise is limited to incarcerated children and children needing out of home placements. Structurally, the expertise and focus developed at CSSD in dealing with this population is quite different from DCF's approach. And despite the influx of the Raise the Age youth, CSSD still saved the state \$2 million on juvenile justice in the last 10 years.

CSSD also has been very collaborative with legal services, particularly with regard to Educational Support Services (ESS). ESS is a partnership in which CSSD refers court-involved youth to legal services to address educational needs. Since 2008, we have handled several hundred ESS cases yearly. The population we serve is arguably one of the neediest and most disenfranchised, as the bulk of our CSSD-referred cases are children of color and kids with disabilities, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, and children with major mental and behavioral health needs. Most of these children are struggling not only with juvenile justice issues, but also educational issues. CSSD's acknowledgement of this overlap and willingness to successfully pilot and run ESS

has allowed these children to receive free, quality legal assistance to address those issues.

Through our partnership, CLS has been able to:

- ensure disabled children are identified for and receive appropriate special education programming,
- obtain evaluations that will help their schools identify and address issues such as ADHD, traumatic brain injury, or dyslexia,
- receive accommodations to which they are entitled under federal and state law, and
- ensure that their families will have the knowledge to continue advocating for them after an attorney is no longer involved.

This ultimately means that these children will have a better shot at being able to attend school, learn while they are in school, graduate, and become successful adults.

CSSD's varied services include a number of in-home therapies and community programming designed to work directly with the highest need children and their families. We have seen tremendous outcomes for children as a result of substance abuse, mental health, and trauma treatments, as well as family and individual therapy and anger management, all of which CSSD has ensured are successful evidence-based programs. The reduction in recidivism rates for these children stemming from completion of these programs and therapies means the kids are staying out of jail and that the state is saving money.

CSSD has done a fantastic job in:

- increasing the availability of in-home and community programming,
- identifying the intersection in juvenile justice involvement and school-based issues,
- improving needs and safety assessments, and
- working with the children's families to limit their involvement with the juvenile justice system and reduce recidivism rates.

All of these things have been proven to improve educational outcomes. This proposal dismantles the effective infrastructure that has allowed us to identify and assist those children who are most in need of legal services, many of whom we may not have otherwise been able to reach. CSSD does not need to be changed because it works.

For these reasons, CLS strongly urges the Judiciary Committee to OPPOSE S.B. 951 AN ACT CONSOLIDATING CRIMINAL JUSTICE, JUVENILE, AND FAMILY SERVICE PROGRAMS as it relates to the dismantling of CSSD. Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Submitted by:

Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.