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## Testimony before the Human Services Committee on S.B. 105

February 23, 2016

Good afternoon, my name is James Haslam; I am an attorney at Connecticut Legal Services, Inc., a non-profit civil law firm dedicated to helping low-income people attain justice. I work in the Public Benefits Unit. I am testifying today on behalf of our clients and the other very low-income, elderly and disabled residents of Connecticut, some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Sections 1 and 2 of this bill seek to reduce the State's obligation to contribute to the funeral and burial expenses of an indigent person or recipient of public benefits.

The bill seeks to accomplish this in two ways, first, by applying what amount to two different assets tests to the decedent, and second, by authorizing the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services to dictate what services and items are essential to a funeral. Both are unfortunate ways to balance the budget, and in tandem with S.B. 17, which proposes a reduction to the actual amount of the contribution from \$1,400 to \$1,000, render this benefit nearly meaningless, robbing our most vulnerable citizens of dignity after life.

It is important to note that the national median cost for a funeral and burial is \$7,181<sup>1</sup>, or 80% more than is currently contributed. Additional cuts would underscore the insufficiency of this benefit.

First, the bill seeks to reduce this benefit dollar-for-dollar based on the liquid assets of the decedent. Recipients of State Supplement and Temporary Family Assistance are already limited to assets of \$1,600 and \$3,000 respectively. For recipients under either program, any remaining assets at their death would only serve to bring their end-of-life services incrementally closer to a dignified service. A deceased recipient of Temporary Family Assistance, by definition, has surviving children who will undoubtedly need any remaining assets to continue on after the passing of a parent. Eliminating the benefit to these surviving children is unnecessarily cruel and unthinkable.

Similarly, the bill eliminates all State contributions to a decedent's funeral costs where others have contributed sums of more than \$3,200. Contributors may include family, friends, community members, churches and others, all of whom are well-

<sup>1</sup> National Funeral Directors Association, <http://nfd.org/about-funeral-service/trends-and-statistics.html>



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meaning and caring, and most likely would not understand the implications of their generosity. This restriction creates a cliff that would instantly negate nearly 1/3 of the funds available. Once this cap is instituted, it would put a further strain on well-intentioned people and institutions that may already be struggling to make ends meet themselves and could result in a chilling effect on these gracious donations.

Finally, the bill gives the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services the authority to determine the allowable costs of each component of a funeral and burial. This restriction is inappropriate as it almost certainly will result in the State defining a "proper" funeral and burial. There is no way that the Commissioner can account for every religious or cultural tradition, and any regulations promulgated based on this authority can impermissibly support certain religions and/or cultures over others.

This bill amounts to a cruel means to balancing the budget. Everyone deserves to be laid to rest with some dignity, even those without means, and those with caring individuals left behind should not be punished. I urge you not to take these measures that would reduce this extremely modest allowance even further.

I appreciate the time of the Committee and the thoughtful attention you bring to these critical issues.