Good evening, Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut! which is a statewide anti-hunger and food security outreach, education and advocacy organization. I am here tonight to offer our view of the proposed budget for the Department of Social Services.

It is difficult to speak to specifics in the budget as it is hard to know what will happen to some of the line items. For example, the Nutrition Assistance line item has funded high protein and fresh food for the food banks to send to their member affiliates, soup kitchens and pantries, called CT-NAP, and community-based organizations who do work helping those who need assistance with food. Much of CT-NAP has drifted into the SSBG/TANF accounts. This budget proposes that the items that are currently in SSBG/TANF accounts will be moved into the budget, and that the Nutrition Assistance line would be cut by 20%. So, while the Nutrition Assistance line was increased but there is no language that explains what will or will not be funded. It's difficult for the public, or the community-based organizations, to respond to this. If you are able to find out what happens to the Nutrition Assistance line, and what the 20% cut will affect in terms of program, programs that help people in our state.

I would say the same for the Human Services Infrastructure (HSI) line – it is opaque, or muddy. How can we speak to the cuts without any true knowledge of what it means?

DSS needs to be commended for the turnaround for SNAP timeliness and for implementation of the new computer system. EHC! has a SNAP Call Center that assists those applying for SNAP, answer questions regarding their applications, and opening MyAccounts through the DSS computer system. We do much of our work from 6 – 9 pm for working families and during the day with the elderly who don’t have access to computers. However, while more people are receiving benefits, like SNAP and child nutrition programs (which we also work to increase access to) and should not need help from the food banks and pantries that is not the case. Food insecurity is at 13.9% or one in seven of our Connecticut neighbors don’t have a consistent reliable access to food, an increase from the previous study. Local community-based organizations and the CT-NAP foods are critical for those who are in need. Additionally, there are a significant amount of people who are not eligible for benefit programs because they are over the income guidelines. Cuts to programs that help them could lead to illness, and increased need and put the community-based organizations at risk. The state should not put its responsibilities onto the private nonprofits and not fund them adequately.

As I understand it, DSS is in the midst of a large change to the computer system. I would like to bring to your attention to a state option that Connecticut has in statute, Public Act No. 02-37, passed in 2002,
that allows DSS to offer Transitional Benefits to those leaving TANF to keep their current SNAP benefit for 3 – 5 months easing the transition from welfare to work. This is a program, paid out of federal SNAP funds needs to be implemented. Just today I heard about a woman who is living in transitional housing in New Haven who got a job. She just found out that she lost all of her benefits, and now she is in worse shape than before she got the job. DSS can remedy this issue and help this woman find her way into employment. Twenty-one states are using this option so it is not something that would be hard to implement and as I said with the new system now is the time to implement the option. There was a bill on this same concept using TANF funds to pay for the transitional benefit, which would use state funds.

This budget also may cut the elderly nutrition programs, by moving Home Delivered Meals to SSBG, and then cutting SSBG by 5%. These programs are barely making it now. The providers are fundraising to pay for them, they are not taking new clients regardless of need, and in some cases are close to closing down. Last year, elderly nutrition programs served 836,809 meals or about 4,000 unduplicated clients. The most recent increase in the rate of reimbursement was in 2015 comprising a 1 % increase over the last full increase in 2007; the CPI has risen more than 13% in that time. In fact, according to the figures provided by the Connecticut Association of Nutrition and Aging Providers (CANAP), the loss to the provider is over $1.00 per meal. For rural communities, the cost is double that leading some providers to cut back to deliveries and may stop altogether, or anywhere from $836,809 to $1,255,000. These providers and their clients cannot sustain more losses.

Given that Meals on Wheels prevented early entry to more costly services like nursing homes and assisted living and clients discharged from hospitals that receive Meals on Wheels have a significantly lower readmission rate. Add this to the cost of Meal on Wheels v. hospital stays, and it only makes sense to fund this vital nutrition and health program. Meals on Wheels is critical for our older adults, and as we know, the drivers who deliver the food become an essential connection for wellness checks for them visit to visit. The unintended consequence of fewer visits by the Meals on Wheels delivery could be life or death.

We are also dismayed that the state is no longer State-funded SNAP for documented immigrants who have lived in Connecticut for 6 months, and are between the ages of 19 – 49 and not disabled. Once they lived in the US they are eligible for SNAP. These are people who may need help to get started and often go off of SNAP and become tax payers. Cutting this low-cost program is a mistake. We appreciate that DSS did not remove everyone from the list and grandfathered in the current participants.

I want to thank you for your long night and very hard work while you move forward.

Good evening.