



Testimony of Ellen Small Billard, M.S.W.
CABHN Coordinator, Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut

Human Services Committee
March 1, 2011

In support of Raised Senate Bill 1042 An Act Concerning a Pilot Project under the Jobs First Employment Services Program

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak, and members of the Human Services committee. My name is Ellen Small Billard, and I am the coordinator of CABHN, the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am here in support of Raised S.B. 1042 An Act Concerning a Pilot Project under the Jobs First Employment Services Program.

CABHN is a statewide advocacy and outreach network committed to helping CT families meet their basic needs, achieve self-sufficiency, and attain economic security. It is also a participating member of the Welfare Working Group. The Welfare Working Group consists of approximately 25 dedicated advocates who have worked together since 1995 to monitor the impact of Connecticut's family welfare program ("Jobs First") and the federal TANF program on low-income families and to propose policies to improve the program.

Recently CABHN and the Welfare Working Group hosted a forum and released a report titled ***"Increasing Opportunity: Improving the Jobs First Employment Services Program,"*** which highlights the job training and educational needs of recipients of Temporary Family Assistance (TFA, or cash assistance). **You received a copy of this report with my testimony from an earlier public hearing.**

The report reflects the experiences of Jobs First program participants, details the challenges these families face in moving from poverty to gainful employment, and offers constructive solutions to help them make a successful transition to self-sufficiency.

The responses we received clearly demonstrate that job training and educational opportunities are imperative to moving families out of poverty.

The current Jobs First program is not moving families out of poverty and into stable jobs that pay a living wage.

A JFES participant from Hartford succinctly summarized the dilemma facing participants under the program's current structure:

“How do you expect people to get a job if they don't have an education? I wanted to go to school and get an education. I did NOT want to receive cash assistance. But I had to care for my child, and I was not able to comply with the Jobs First program if I went to school. *You have to help people get a real education, not just give them certificates for trainings.*”

Therefore, we support an improved Jobs First Employment Services program that:

- **emphasizes long-term poverty reduction and sustainable employment, rather than short-term job acquisition.** This would require providing intensive case management to participants and more flexible time limits.
- **expands available education and training options** for JFES participants.

It is for this reason that I support S.B. 1042 An Act Concerning a Pilot Project under the Jobs First Employment Services Program.

S.B. 1042 would serve as an excellent framework for helping families on cash assistance overcome multiple and persistent barriers to self-sufficiency by:

- 1.) **Providing intensive case-management to at least 100 Jobs First participants.**
Intensive case-management allows workers to more adequately assess the needs of families, identifying barriers to employment (i.e. access to childcare, transportation, mental health needs, and educational barriers), as well as to assess the strengths of the client and the family. Case managers can then work alongside the client to address these barriers and expand upon client strengths. As outside barriers are addressed, clients are better able to devote attention to seeking and securing stable employment and furthering their education.
- 2.) **Prioritizing the client's educational goals.** Because of both state and federal requirements in the Jobs First and TANF programs, the JFES program too often the focuses on moving participants immediately into jobs and off of cash assistance, rather than on giving them the educational opportunities that will be key to securing long-term employment that moves them out of poverty.

The program has sometimes contradictory goals of moving families into **sustainable** employment within 21 months **and** engaging JFES participants in work activities that count toward meeting federal work participation rates.

The provisions in this pilot project increase access to educational opportunities for program participants, including adult basic education, vocational skills training, and post-secondary education by extending eligibility for cash assistance benefits beyond 21-months for pilot participants who demonstrate a good-faith effort to comply with program requirements. This is vital to ensuring clients have sufficient time to complete their educational goals.

- 3.) **Equipping participants to work at jobs that pay a living wage.** The bill allows for funding to facilitate client participation in necessary adult basic education, skills training, post-secondary education, and subsidized employment. The educational and job training opportunities that pilot participants will receive increases their marketability and prepares them for jobs that will lift them out of poverty and into self-sufficiency.

We must restructure the Jobs First program to focus on long-term poverty reduction by providing participants with legitimate opportunities for education and quality job training.

Raised S.B. 1042 is a low-cost and important first step toward achieving this goal.

Thank you for your time and consideration to this bill.

Ellen Small Billard, M.S.W.

esmall@larcc.org

(860) 278-5688 x. 208