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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 251, AN ACT CONCERNING PROGRAMS ADMINISTERED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Good Afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Abercrombie and Members of the Human Services Committee. I am Roger Senserrich, Policy Coordinator at the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide, nonprofit agency that works to reduce poverty and promote economic success through both policy and program work.

I am here to express our strong support for SB 251, a bill that aims to improve the application process for programs administered by the Department of Social Services (DSS). We believe that this legislation will help improve access to the programs administered by the Department, improving service and making help available to those in need.

DSS is undergoing major structural changes. After years of delays, DSS is finally working on a replacement for its aging Electronic Management System (EMS), first introduced in 1989. The agency has been a key participant in the successful rollout of the Affordable Care Act in the state, and is finally allowing its clients to apply for benefits online using its new ConneCT portal. DSS is at the initial stages of big transition that promises better service in the future. Unfortunately, its service during this transition has worsened significantly.

Since 2009, CAHS has worked with dozens of community based organization statewide to provide application assistance to hundreds of families across Connecticut every month. As part of our AccessBenefits Online program, CAHS and our partners screen about 1,000 households for benefits and help them prepare and send complete benefit applications to DSS. Thanks to a data exchange agreement with DSS, CAHS is able to track the enrollment status of every application we submit, giving us a large sample of households across the state.

Our numbers for the past few months show a dramatic drop on enrollment rates on SNAP and Medicaid benefits. DSS introduced many of the process changes currently underway during the summer months of 2013. The percentage of failed applications in the fall almost doubled compared to what we were seeing in the spring. Wait times have skyrocketed. Many applications are sent to DSS offices never to be seen again; we have many cases of clients having to send their paperwork two or three times before they can get their benefits processed. When trying to reach a case worker by phone

for information, wait times are often more than two hours as workers are overwhelmed with calls. As all applications are scanned centrally, hand delivering them to local DSS offices barely makes a difference. To compound the problem, the website is scarcely any better – if clients are not able to scan their documents (and many cannot) they still have to send them in the mail. Even with scanned paperwork, processing times for ConneCT fillings are equally slow.

The origin of this problem is not new: after many years of underinvestment, DSS as a whole is barely able to cope with its caseload. DSS currently has the same number of workers that it had in 2002, even with recent hiring, but it has to process a much larger caseload. Due to the recession and expanded eligibility, SNAP caseloads have doubled in the past 12 years. The poor economy and new enrollments from the Affordable Care Act have increased Medicaid/Husky case loads at a similar pace. With applications not being processed any faster and an aging infrastructure, DSS has tried to shift resources around, often leaving call centers and client support staff understaffed. Modernization has placed additional strain on the system during the transition, and delays and lost applications are the result.

The bill under consideration, SB 251, will provide clients and the agency with more flexibility on how they handle applications, and create additional guarantees that they are processed in a timely matter. DSS currently only accepts applications either by conventional mail, hand delivered to its offices or through the ConneCT website. The bill will open the door for applications to be sent by e-mail or fax, giving more options for both clients and providers, and offering in both cases the possibility of having transmission receipts to protect enrollment dates. This will help families in need gain better, faster access to DSS during this period of transition, and help community based organizations provide assistance more effectively. Commissioner Bremby has repeatedly stated that DSS needs to be more open to clients and community organizations. This bill would help the agency fulfill this promise.

To further improve access to benefits, CAHS also supports HB 5137, an act that streamlines the application process for Husky A and B by restoring continuous eligibility for those benefits. This bill will reduce the administrative burden for DSS by limiting gaps of coverage by extending the eligibility period for these two programs. 32 states offer 12 months of coverage for children; families in the state would greatly benefit if Connecticut joined them.

In addition to the changes build into the bill, DSS needs more resources. The Governor's budget includes a proposal for hiring 103 additional DSS staff, with 66 new positions and 37 to fill vacancies. This is a welcome first step to provide better service in the short term. To ensure that the agency fulfills its mission, however, the modernization process needs to be completed as soon as possible, introducing truly effective systems and processes to help those in need. Connecticut has been very successful rolling out the

Affordable Care Act. It is time to replicate this success by replacing a DSS system that is old, archaic and inefficient and has proved time and time again incapable of serving Connecticut's families effectively.

Thank you for hearing our concerns today.