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Testimony before the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee Regarding Proposed Bill No. 837, Proposed Bill No. 7212, and Proposed Bill No. 7234

Gwen Pastor, Policy Analyst, Connecticut Association for Human Services, March 9, 2017

Good afternoon, Senator Linares, Senator Bye, Representative Haddad, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee.

My name is Gwen Pastor, and I am a Policy Analyst 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 initiatives.

I am testifying regarding Raised Bill No. 837, An Act Concerning Apprenticeship Opportunities for High Growth, High Demand Jobs; Raised Bill No. 7212, An Act Concerning the Promotion of Loan Forgiveness Programs; and Raised Bill No. 7234, An Act Concerning Financial Aid for Student in Crisis

Raised Bill No. 837, An Act Concerning Apprenticeship Opportunities for High Growth, High Demand Jobs

Raised Bill No. 837 would establish a task force to study the feasibility of developing a public-private partnership that provides apprenticeship opportunities for high school and college students. The task force would be charged with:

- Identifying high growth, high-demand jobs in the state in fields, including, finance, computer science, engineering, health care, insurance, and biomedicine;
- Identify the education and skill level requirements for those jobs;
- Analyze whether Connecticut's educational achievement and attainment sufficiently satisfy the requirements of such jobs;
- Identify statewide demographic trends in the workforce;
- Review apprenticeship programs administered in other states, including those in Colorado and Georgia;
- Analyze the feasibility of creating in-state partnerships that provide apprenticeship opportunities;

- Examine whether the existing apprenticeship program can be utilized or expanded to develop such partnerships; and
- Identify any potential institutional or legal obstacles associated with creating such partnerships.

Apprenticeship programs are crucial to the development of a skilled workforce. Programs like Colorado’s CareerWise program, which provides high school students with the ability to work towards graduating from high school, while also earning post-secondary credit or credentials in their chosen career path, provide alternative pathways to post-secondary education for those students who may not wish to or have the financial capacity to enter four-year institutions. Additionally, employers have found that the cost of training apprentices is quickly outweighed by the benefits they reap, including labor completed by their apprentices and access to a highly-qualified pipeline of workers.¹ While Connecticut’s Department of Labor currently coordinates the state’s apprenticeship programs, both the variety of fields one could go into and the number of businesses involved are limited. Introducing public and private partnerships would encourage the involvement of more fields and employers. Expanding upon Connecticut’s apprenticeship system would strengthen Connecticut’s workforce and benefit both employers and employees. Raised Bill No. 837 would be the first step in determining how to improve Connecticut’s apprenticeship system in order to strengthen Connecticut’s workforce.

Raised Bill No. 7212, An Act Concerning the Promotion of Loan Forgiveness Programs

Raised Bill No. 7212 would implement a promotional plan to provide the public with information regarding federal loan forgiveness programs available to those working in public service and teacher in high-need areas. The federal program is designed to encourage skilled, well-educated workers to enter public service jobs and the teaching profession. Under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PLSF), workers engaged in fields of public service qualify for loan forgiveness on their remaining balance after they have made 120 qualifying payments on their loans while employed full-time by public service employers. This equates to approximately 10 years working in fields of public service. The Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program provides teachers in high-need areas up to \$17,500 of loan forgiveness after teaching for five consecutive school years. While this program is helpful for both workers and the industries they serve, it is useless if people are unaware that they are eligible for it. Frequently, workers are unaware of how the program works, if they qualify for it, how to apply, or even of

¹ Rusch, Emily. “\$9.5 million in grants back apprenticeship program for Colorado high school students.” September, 2016. <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/09/15/9-5-million-grants-apprenticeship-program-for-colorado-high-school-students-careerwise/>.

its existence. This bill ensures would ensure that those who are eligible for these programs are aware that they qualify and are well-informed about how it works.

While CAHS supports this bill, we also encourage the legislature to expand loan forgiveness programs to more employment sectors and decrease the amount of time one must consecutively work in their field. Due to the instability of many public service, non-profit organizations, many workers may find it difficult to consistently find employment in these sectors, forcing them to find employment in private industries. Expanding the scope of these programs would help to encourage employees to remain in or return to public, non-profit organizations.

Raised Bill No. 7234, An Act Concerning Financial Aid for Students in Crisis

Raised Bill No. 7234 would provide greater support to students who are food insecure, at risk of homelessness or homeless, or who have claimed an exemption from providing parental information under the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) due to special circumstances. The bill would:

- Require public institutions of higher education to identify these students in crisis;
- Designate a crisis coordinator to provide resources to students in crisis;
- Establish policies that allow students to access emergency temporary housing;
- Allow students in crisis to remain in on-campus housing throughout the year at a low cost;
- Allow students in crisis to establish on-campus mailing addresses;
- Give priority to students in crisis for summer employment opportunities; and
- Require a financial aid administrator to assist students in crisis in applying for financial aid awards, grants, scholarships and other financial resources.

For students burdened with these struggles, higher education is a means towards raising themselves out of their current situations and into well-paying jobs. However, these students also face great barriers towards their goals. Homeless and food-insecure students frequently lose access to housing and food during school vacations and the summer when dorms and cafeterias close, and many students find it difficult to complete their coursework due to their cumbersome financial burdens. According to a study completed by the National Student Campaign Against Hunger & Homelessness, 55% of food insecure students reported that they

were unable to purchase required textbooks, 53% reported missing a class, and 25% reported dropping a class due to their financial difficulties.²

Students at Connecticut's institutions of higher education face these difficulties. A recent survey of 350 students at Central Connecticut State University revealed that 62 of the surveyed students identified as homeless, lived out of their cars, were couch surfing, or were staying in friends' dorm rooms.³ Additionally, 37% of surveyed students reported that they experienced hunger in the past month.⁴ As a result of Connecticut's students' needs, many of the state's colleges have opened food pantries on campus, including Middlesex Community College, Central Connecticut State University, and Norwalk Community College. However, these food pantries struggle to remain stocked and serve the needs of students, and they are not equipped to address student's housing needs.

It is essential that these students are provided with the supports they need in order to succeed and progress into Connecticut's workforce. Raised Bill No. 7234 would begin the process of supporting Connecticut's students in order to ensure that they are able to graduate and rise out of their financial difficulties.

We understand that hard decisions must be made this session. However, alternative paths to skill-development and post-secondary education, access to affordable higher education, and supporting our most vulnerable students are crucial to developing the workforce Connecticut needs. CAHS supports these bills and all bills that would make higher education more accessible and affordable in order to strengthen Connecticut's workforce and families.

² National Student Campaign Against Hunger & Homelessness, *Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students*. October 2016. http://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf.

³ CT Food Bank, "Hunger Goes to College" March, 2017. <http://www.ctfoodbank.org/hunger-goes-to-college/>

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