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Testimony before the Appropriations Committee in Regard to Higher Education

H.B. No. 5035, AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2019.

My name is Elizabeth Fraser and I am the policy director at the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a statewide nonprofit agency that works to reduce poverty and promote equity and economic success for children and families through both policy and program initiatives.

We are grateful for your work in negotiating and passing the FY18/19 biennial budget. Although difficult choices were necessary and cuts were implemented, we are realistic and realize they could have been far worse. Going forward, we are pleased that Governor Malloy's proposed FY19 budget adjustment seems to keep additional cuts to a minimum. Although FY18 budgeted lapses were annualized, we are encouraged that \$ 6,250,000 of the original budget cut to the community college system has been restored. CAHS supports these recommendations, but eventually would like to see funding fully restored and greater supports for low-income students.

As proponents of policies that serve to lift low-income families, we support a strong, accessible and affordable CSCU system. Higher education leads to improved employment opportunities for the individual and stronger outcomes for his or her family and community.

CAHS is especially invested in two components of the Higher Education budget: access to community college and developmental education.

Access to affordable education is the one of the important roles that community colleges play in our system of higher education. Often a community college is the first point of entry for students with limited resources, for students who might be the first family member to attend college, and for those who speak English as a second language. Data we receive from the Working Poor Families Project indicates that 27.7% of adults between 18 and 24 have only a high school equivalency, 10.8 % do not even completed high school.¹ We need to do better. We need these students to participate and find success in post secondary education settings and enter a career with increasing opportunity. to provide for their families, pay taxes, and to help build a stronger Connecticut economy. We encourage you to ensure that the community college system remains viable and available throughout the state.

To truly have a higher education system that is accessible for all students, we urge continued and robust funding of developmental education programs.

In 2012, Connecticut passed a sweeping reform of its developmental education system, Public Act 12-40. Funding appropriated to implement PA 12-40 provides for a series of remedial opportunities for students who have a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, but may need additional

supports to enter and be successful in a college environment. This includes three levels of developmental remedial education offered within the community college system.ⁱⁱ

Transitional students need this support: they are overwhelmingly low-income and minority, often second language learners, sometimes with learning disabilities. These students are making the effort to apply for college and seek an education in hopes for a better job and a better life, sometimes against overwhelming odds, only to discover they can't access and progress through the college system because of their level of proficiency.

Without the additional academic supports accessible through developmental education, once hopeful students are excluded from participating in higher education and are often left to piece together a "survival income" in low-skill, low-pay jobs. Without upward movement into higher income brackets, families remain in need of state assistance, employers remain without a skilled workforce, and Connecticut suffers.

We believe it is also important that Connecticut continues to collect relevant data in order to assess the strategies put in place to support students. A continuous quality improvement loop based on collected data is a solid method of determining what strategies are most effective and what additional resources students need to be successful. Data collected by the Working Poor Families Project indicates that only 33% of students in Connecticut community colleges either receive a degree or enter a 4 year college. (3 year outcomes) We are ranked 36th in relation to other states.

This is not surprising. In addition to academic proficiency, we know there are legitimate reasons that students leave community college without a degree. As students work in school to be successful, they often face challenges that are difficult to overcome without supports that are not within their reach. Managing unpredictable work schedules, lack of childcare, undependable transportation, and surviving the daily struggles of poverty all contribute to the inability to be successful in higher education. This paradigm is inequitable, leaves our poor and low income students behind, and needs adjustment.

We need to do better. We need to provide the means for an independent evaluator to assess the progress of students in community college programs, to track the success of the programs, and determine barriers to success. Barriers should be recognized and acted upon. If our system of higher education is to be successful in providing the lowest-performing students with a pathway towards college success and greater opportunity, practices that foster success should be documented, shared and incorporated throughout the system. Additional funding for supports that show promise towards increased retention, need to be in place. Determining innovative ways to access additional federal SNAP E&T funding is one way to begin.

Connecticut needs to continue to lower barriers to higher education. 70% of existing and future job openings in Connecticut will soon require qualified workers with post-secondary education, and the General Assembly must play a leading role ensuring that funding is allocated to the programs and activities that benefit all our students in an accountable and transparent manner.

Thank you for all your work and for the opportunity to speak to you this evening.

ⁱ The Working Poor Families Project data files provide updated information on policy and programmatic indicators, where updates are available, and present a condensed version of the data based indicators generated by Population Reference Bureau as of May 5, 2017 Based on the most recent data which is from 2015.

ⁱⁱ http://cahs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CAHS2015_DevEdReform-final1.pdf