

TESTIMONY OF THE COMMUNITY HEALTH LAW PROJECT

TO THE NEW JERSEY ASSEMBLY

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

January 27, 2016

Good morning. I am Stuart Weiner and I am the Managing Attorney of the Trenton office of the Community Health Law Project. We are a statewide legal services organization providing legal and advocacy services to low-income people with disabilities. I want to thank the committee for allowing us to discuss a few of the issues that our clients face.

It is important to note that the cost of living in New Jersey is among the highest in the country. Yet, single individuals receiving Work First New Jersey-General Assistance have an income of either \$140 per month for employable persons, or \$210 per month for unemployable individuals. In either case, it is extremely difficult to find affordable housing, or maintain oneself. A monthly welfare grant (WFNJ-TANF) for a family of four is \$488. Even for people with disabilities who receive federal SSI benefits, the full grant of \$764 per month is inadequate for even a minimal standard of living.

The recent expiration of two housing assistance programs program offered by the Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development has exacerbated this problem. The programs, known as the "24-Month Housing Assistance Program" (HAP) and the "Housing Hardship Extension" program (HHE) provided many of these individuals and families with rental assistance and other forms of housing assistance for an extended period of time, during which efforts were made to find subsidized or otherwise affordable living arrangements. Unfortunately, there is such a shortage of affordable housing for this very low-income population that it often takes years to find permanent, affordable housing.

Unfortunately, both the HAP and HHE were three-year pilot programs that expired in July of last year, suddenly jeopardizing the housing of thousands of vulnerable people. Some of these people became homeless. Others were able to receive help. In December, a new program called the "Intensive Case Management" program (ICM) was created by the Division of Family Development. This will provide limited help to some of those affected. However, many people are still not covered by the new program. Consequently, we are urging the Legislature to act on this important issue as soon as possible.

Another issue of concern is the ban on the receipt of General Assistance for individuals who have been convicted of a drug distribution offense. Part of the federal and state War on Drugs, the federal law, effective August 22, 1996, and corresponding Work First New Jersey- GA ban was intended to prevent drug dealers from claiming public benefits. However, after almost 20 years, it has been demonstrated that the people who are banned from getting assistance are not drug kingpins, but more likely people with addiction problems, mental health problems or both. Often, these people were caught possessing small amounts of drugs, but were charged with distribution and plead guilty in order to get out of jail.

Unfortunately, the GA ban applies regardless of the quantity of drugs and no matter how long ago the offense occurred. It applies regardless of what efforts the individual has made in to rehabilitate

themselves and overcome their addiction. And it is the only offense that carries a lifetime disqualification from GA benefits. A person who commits a homicide or other violent crime, a theft offense or any other crime can still receive GA, if they meet all of the other criteria.

Many of the people who are now dealing with homelessness and deprivation in our State are among those banned from GA eligibility for this reason. They are not drug kingpins. They are people in need of help to recover their lives. They sometimes end up in our hospitals and jails. They sleep in tent cities or abandoned buildings or overnight shelters.

In addition, a growing body of research demonstrates that the cost of providing public assistance is offset by cost savings related to the reduction of emergency medical, social and law enforcement services. For example, a Housing First demonstration initiative conducted by the Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness generated more than \$9,000 in cost savings per year for each homeless household provide with housing and services. A study commissioned by the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness tracked 107 chronically homeless individuals in three Central Florida counties. The cost in emergency and medical services, criminalization and incarceration was \$31,065 per homeless person. By comparison, the cost of providing both housing and supportive services was only \$10,051 per year. Similar findings have been reported in studies in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Santa Clara County, California.

A bill that would have eliminated the lifetime ban was passed in the last Legislature, but was pocket vetoed by the Governor, who explained his concerns in veto message. The prime sponsors of the bill, Senator Cunningham and Assemblywoman Muoio, have already reintroduced it in this Legislature. We are very hopeful that progress can quickly be made to pass a bill that satisfies the concerns of the Governor and can be enacted into law.

On a somewhat more self-interested note, another unmet need is the shortage of free and low-cost legal services for indigent persons. Our agency provides direct legal services and advocacy to approximately 3,000 disabled individuals a year. We handle a range of cases, from evictions and foreclosures, to public benefits appeals, family court, civil rights and health care advocacy. Our clients are people with mental illness, people with HIV/AIDS, people with visual impairments and certain people with physical disabilities. Our intervention often saves our clients from homelessness and re-hospitalization. We would very much welcome opportunities for future funding for the legal assistance for individuals with other disabilities, such as the deaf and hard of hearing, people with addiction problems and those developmental disabilities. In addition, other poor people who do not have disabilities, face difficulties in finding legal help due to funding limitations of other legal services programs around the State. Whether it is provided by our organization or other legal services programs, we believe that it is important to improve targeted legal assistance to low – income people in civil legal matters.

We know that there are many challenges to lawmakers and government officials in formulating new ideas and implementing plans to reduce poverty and homelessness in our State. This challenge is complicated by the fact that the causes of poverty are numerous and varied. There is no single solution to every person's situation. What is needed is a coordinated approach by government agencies, non-profits, the business community, religious and civic organizations to get the most out of our finite anti-

poverty resources. We believe that our experiences can be a part of informing that discussion and we look forward to working with all parties to develop creative solutions to poverty in our State.