

**Winter, 2004
Special Edition**

community connections

CAHS 2004 Legislative Update

In This Issue:

Follow the bills that CAHS is supporting in the 2004 Legislative Session

Over the past several years, many social service programs designed to meet the basic needs of Connecticut residents have been eviscerated by the state legislature, directly harming low-income residents and the nonprofit agencies that serve them, in some cases threatening their ability to continue operating. Essential programs have had funding reduced, eligibility narrowed, or been completely eliminated. Needed programs cut in the past year include benefits for legal immigrants; health insurance for children, parents, seniors, and the mentally ill; outreach programs; child care subsidies; and community health centers. Many cuts are short-sighted and will end up costing taxpayers more in the long run through increased costs, including additional visits to hospital emergency departments, parents unable to work and pay taxes, and lost revenue to the state government for programs paid for by the federal government.

CAHS will work with other advocacy organizations to prevent further cuts, and seek to restore funding for critical programs. We will also work to lay the groundwork for expansions of programs that will help low-income people become self-sufficient. State government has a critical role to play in moving families from poverty to economic independence. This investment—in early care and education, basic needs programs, job training, and asset building—will reap strong returns not only for the families helped, but also for government, businesses, and the state's overall economic health. In this wealthy state, a fair share budget can generate the necessary resources to create a strong quality of life for all residents. The following is a listing of the bills that CAHS has either introduced, testified in favor of, or is tracking for members.

Top CAHS Priorities:

- Restore funding for and re-open the Care 4 Kids child care subsidy program
- Maintain and expand the state Individual Development Account (IDA) program
- Reform Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) to enable families to succeed
- Provide information on other programs to applicants for state assistance

Empower Low-Income Families to Build Assets

Require tax preparers to disclose loan interest rates.

Because of its complexity, most low- and moderate-income people who qualify for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) use paid tax preparers. The IRS estimates that low-income Connecticut residents paid over \$20 million in tax preparation fees in 2001, in part because many took Refund Anticipation Loans (RALs), commonly called “rapid refunds,” to receive their tax refunds and credits faster. Connecticut’s General Assembly should follow the lead of Minnesota’s legislature, which passed legislation requiring tax preparers to clearly inform people of the terms of the loan, and the availability of a refund, without a loan, in 7-10 days by filing electronically with the IRS.

Related Bill

SB 476 would require a disclosure that a loan given by a tax preparer to a client in anticipation of an income tax refund is subject to fees, including interest.

Maintain and expand the state Individual Development Account (IDA) program.

The state’s IDA program encourages low-income families to learn more about personal finance and save for the purchase of a house, security deposit on an apartment, purchase of a vehicle to go to work, fund higher education or job training, or start a small business by matching personal savings with state and private funds. The program is extremely effective in helping low-income people acquire the tools that enable them to become economically self-sufficient. CAHS advocates for additional funding for the state program, and is working with the Appropriations Committee to pass this measure.

Work to reduce child poverty in Connecticut.

While Connecticut’s overall poverty rate is below the national average, the child poverty rate is 10.4%, which means that over 70,000 children in the state live below the poverty line. CAHS and many other organizations around the state, led by the Commission on Children, are asking the General Assembly to address this problem.

Related Bill

HB 5572 would require the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House, to develop a ten-year plan to reduce the number of children living in poverty in the state by fifty percent. This bill includes analysis, planning, and development of real solutions to address the needs of the poor children of Connecticut.

Strengthen Early Care and Education

Restore funding for and re-open the Care 4 Kids child care subsidy program.

Connecticut’s child care subsidy program, Care 4 Kids, has been closed to new families earning under 50% of state median income since July, 2002, and the state has cut \$30 million from the program over two years, with another \$6 million cut planned for the second year of the biennial budget. As of December 2003, there were more than 9,000 families on the wait list, with more than 15,000 children. Enrollment has dropped from 39,000 children to under 20,000, and the state Office of Policy and Management has applied \$27 million in savings from the program (beyond the reduced budget appropriation) to plug the state budget’s deficit.

Related Bill

SB 458 would require that the waiting list for the Care 4 Kids program be given first priority for enrollment, and new funds be allocated to allow for program expansion.

Other bills associated with Care 4 Kids improvements: SB 78, SB 79, HB 5285, HB 5290, HB 5346.

Create universal access to pre-kindergarten.

The State Department of Education (SDE) is taking the lead on promoting a plan to create universal access to pre-school programs for three and four-year-olds by 2010. CAHS strongly supports the goal of universal access to ensure that all children are ready to learn when they reach kindergarten. We support full-day programs that allow parents to work, and wrap-around services for families, similar to Connecticut’s successful School Readiness program. We also support efforts to implement universal pre-K access as an element of an overall birth-five program that looks at the needs of children under age three and their parents. CAHS is working with SDE, the Early Childhood Alliance, Connecticut Voices for Children, the Connecticut Commission on Children, and others on this initiative.

Related Bill

HB 5579 would require towns and local boards of education to provide preschool spaces for four year olds not currently served by School Readiness beginning in the 2005 school year. In the 2007 school year, this provision would be extended to include three year olds.

Expand the School Readiness Program.

The General Assembly should begin to expand the School Readiness program to include the estimated 15,000 three and four-year-old children who are eligible in the priority, transitional and severe needs school districts. Numerous state and local studies have demonstrated the success of

School Readiness in narrowing the achievement gap and helping children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. CAHS supports the Commission on Children in its efforts to provide full year, comprehensive services for all eligible children.

Bills associated with School Readiness that CAHS is tracking:
HB 5426, HB 5427, HB 5428.

Improve the Health and Human Services System

Restore HUSKY/SAGA funds and benefits and block federal waivers.

CAHS is part of the broad *ad hoc* Medicaid Defense Coalition asking the General Assembly to overturn legislation passed in 2003 that instructs the state to request Medicaid waivers from the federal government to impose co-pays and premium cost sharing on low-income people enrolled in Medicaid and HUSKY. The Children's Health Council estimates that 86,000 people in Connecticut may lose coverage as a result of the planned imposition of premiums.

Related Bill

SB 457 would eliminate co-payment, cost sharing and premium requirements mandated in the Husky, Medicaid and State Administered General Assistance (SAGA) programs that were enacted in the 2003 session; restore cash benefit levels available under the SAGA program; restore presumptive and guaranteed eligibility in the Medicaid and Husky programs; and restore eligibility in the Husky Program, Part A to relatives and needy caretakers with incomes of not more than 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

Reform Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) to enable families to succeed.

Since the implementation of welfare reform legislation in 1996, it has become obvious that some elements of TFA do not work well. In particular, many parents leaving TFA do so without a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) or the skills necessary to obtain gainful employment. TFA needs to promote GEDs and improved employment training leading to gainful employment with incomes above the Federal Poverty Level. CAHS is working with the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs (CABHN) and the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) on these issues.

Related Bill

SB 554 seeks to enhance the TFA program. In short, the bill would provide TFA recipients with greater opportunity to satisfy employment services requirements

also allow the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide benefit extensions to recipients who are making a good faith effort to comply with employment requirements but have difficulty securing employment because they live in areas of high unemployment.

Reduce Hunger and Enable Residents to Meet Basic Needs

Provide information on other programs to applicants for state assistance.

Connecticut currently has approximately 188,000 Food Stamp recipients, which represents 62% of those who are potentially eligible. More than 80,000 Connecticut residents are eligible, yet not participating in the program. The state should work to increase the number of eligible residents who participate in Food Stamps and other federally funded nutrition programs. Direct certification, when possible, should be used for programs with similar income guidelines.

Beginning this year, CAHS plans to work with the state agencies that administer federally funded nutrition programs (school meals, WIC, CACFP) to share information with households that are potentially eligible for Food Stamps and other programs.

Restore Food Stamps and other benefits to legal immigrants.

In 2003, the General Assembly failed to keep open intake for programs that benefit legal immigrants, including Food Stamps. Previously, legal immigrants who did not qualify for federal Food Stamps received the same benefits from the state. The cost of opening intake for Food Stamps in particular would be minimal, and the budget passed last year includes sufficient funding to open intake. End Hunger Connecticut! is taking the lead to reopen intake for Food Stamps, and CAHS is working with other groups, including One Connecticut, to restore all benefits for legal immigrants, including HUSKY and SAGA.

Related Bill

SB 326 will accomplish all of these goals in restoring benefits for legal immigrants. This bill has received a favorable change of reference and was sent to the Appropriations Committee on March 8th.

CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION FOR HUMAN SERVICES (860) 951-2212

JIM HORAN: ASSET BUILDING - EXT. 235
DONNA OSUCH: CARE 4 KIDS & SCHOOL READINESS - EXT. 229
TRACY HELIN: HUNGER & BASIC NEEDS - EXT. 236

An Advocacy Primer: Action Steps to Take During the Legislative Session

An advocate is a person who works on behalf of a cause or a group of people to create positive change. There are multiple ways you can advocate depending on your skills, comfort level and time. CAHS predicts that the challenges our state faces in the current legislative session will require the work of many more dedicated advocates to stem the tide of additional harmful cuts, let alone create positive change. Below, we offer some ideas to spark your interest, get you started, or challenge you to do more.

Contact your state legislators. Many policy decisions are made at this level. At a minimum, have their names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses handy. Always begin written correspondence and telephone calls with your name and address so they know you are a voting constituent. If you haven't met them, set up a brief meeting in their office, or invite them to see and experience the issue on which you are working. Write letters, make phone calls, or be willing to testify when your issue comes up. You can also become involved in elections by asking candidates where they stand on your issues, working on the campaign of a candidate who supports your issue, and VOTING.

Advocate to the Administrative branch of government—state agencies and departments. While the legislative branch often crafts policy, the Administrative branch interprets and enacts policy. Not only should you get to know the state agencies that have governance over your issues, but it is also important to introduce yourself to the staff who work on those issues.

Other steps you can take:

- **Educate the public.**
- **Educate our colleagues.**
- **Use the media.**

How to contact your legislators:

Senate Democrats – (800) 842-1420
Senate Republicans – (800) 842-1421
House Democrats – (800) 841-1902
House Republicans – (800) 842-1423

CAHS

Connecticut Association for Human Services
110 Bartholomew Avenue
Suite 4030
Hartford, CT 06106

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Hartford, CT
Permit No. 5052

“Strengthening Needy Children, Families and Communities Since 1910”