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Keep the Promise Appropriations Committee Testimony
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Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Merrill, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, Keep the Promise Coalition Coordinator, and I'm here tonight to testify about the DSS budget.

As you may already know, Keep the Promise was formed in the years following the closure of two of Connecticut's large State psychiatric hospitals, Fairfield Hills and Norwich State Hospital. It was promised that a comprehensive, community mental health system would be enhanced and sustained. That promise has not been kept. While Connecticut attempts to expand access to health care coverage, older adults and people with serious psychiatric and physical disabilities continue to be left far behind. The Medicaid income limit for people who are "aged, blind, or disabled" should be set at the same standard as all other adults on Medicaid. Currently it is as 60-80% of the Federal poverty level and has remained at this rate since 1990. As we all know, the cost of living has skyrocketed for everyone. Imagine for a moment that it is 1990 and your income is below poverty level. Now try to imagine that your income does not go up for the next 18 years! This is what we have let happen for folks who are aged, blind, or disabled, the most vulnerable and medically fragile in our population.

But we're not done. Imagine now that, because your poverty level income is deemed "too high", that you have to go on a complex, restrictive and administratively burdensome program called the "spend down". In a nutshell, because your income is too high, you would have to prove that you incur enough medical bills in a six month period to "spend down" to qualify for Medicaid. Meanwhile, your bills add up because you cannot afford to pay them due to very low income, some providers may refuse to see you while the bills remain unpaid, and you may be forced to choose between paying for expensive medication and food for example.

But unfortunately we are still not done. The implementation of Medicare Part D has compounded the problem by making it even harder to qualify for Medicaid because you cannot count the cost of your medications toward your spend down. Raising the Medicaid income limit, so that fewer people have a spend down, will help people who are caught in the “Part D trap” and simplify access to vital health care services. We are asking that the Medicaid Income Limit be raised to the same level as it is for adults on the HUSKY Medicaid program (185% of poverty level). There is no justification for different income standards, and especially for such a huge disparity between two groups of people.

Keep the Promise would also like to advocate for Rental Assistance Program (RAP) certificates for single adults and families in need of permanent supportive housing. Housing is a vital cornerstone to peoples’ health and well-being. It is a proven, cost-effective solution to homelessness. We ask that you fund 650 new units of Supportive Housing this year. RAP certificates are an important tool for many people in making Supportive Housing affordable.

Keep the Promise supports the Governor’s funding to improve nursing home screenings for people with mental illness to ensure appropriate placements. We also support funding efforts such as Money Follows the Person and the joint DSS and DMHAS effort to move people with psychiatric disabilities from long-term care facilities into community settings. These are all critical, fiscally sound and humane solutions for our citizens.

Finally, we would also like to mention that we support funding a 9% COLA to prevent further erosion of basic services among community children’s and social service providers in our state. As Commissioner Kirk mentioned, the mental health system is in a state of paralysis. There is no room left for underfunding. It will only cost us far more in the long run. Thank you for your time in listening. I’d be happy to answer any questions you might have.