July 16, 2020

Senator Richard Blumenthal  
706 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Chris Murphy  
136 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Blumenthal and Murphy:

As negotiations start for the next COVID-19 relief package, we request that a flexible emergency fund targeted to individuals and families with the lowest incomes, such as that proposed by Senator Ron Wyden, be included in your list of priorities.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 350,783 people in Connecticut lived below the federal poverty level, struggling to meet their basic needs. Now, we see them struggling even more and there are few resources available to help them. Although the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics officially estimates the unemployment rate in Connecticut to be 9.4%, the State Department of Labor’s Office of Research estimates the real unemployment rate to be closer to 19%. In other words, nearly one in five members of the Connecticut labor force are out of work. These job losses are most often for low-wage work, affecting communities of color most adversely. The effects of systemic racism in policy decisions and disinvestment in our communities of color are evident in the hardships these families face every day and those hardships have been amplified by the crisis – both in health and economic impacts.

The Pandemic TANF Assistance Act (S. 3672), introduced by Senator Wyden would help address this need. It creates a new grants program—the Coronavirus Emergency Assistance Grant program—that would provide $10 billion to states, territories and tribes to address the unmet needs of families and individuals with the lowest incomes. Importantly, this fund would allow Connecticut to provide emergency assistance to families and individuals that have been left out of other relief measures, including immigrants, individuals returning from jail or prison and survivors of domestic violence, and young people from low-income neighborhoods just entering the labor market, among others. Connecticut was slow to recover from the Great Recession of 2008, and to the extent that the job market did recover, in many cases higher-wage work was replaced by low-wage work. Many families entered the COVID-19 epidemic in a state of financial fragility. Limited savings, longer periods of joblessness, and higher food and utility costs have stretched their already-limited budgets to the breaking point, leaving many unable to pay rent and without enough food to eat. As of June 26, FoodShare had delivered over 1,000,000 meals to Connecticut families with long lines at the Rentschler Field distribution site daily.

The Coronavirus Emergency Assistance Grant Program would provide funds that could be used to provide eligible families with short-term cash, non-cash and in-kind assistance to help address their basic needs, or for subsidized employment at the appropriate time that is safe and consistent with public health guidance.
The minor cost of the bill, relative to other important economic relief efforts, would have a significant benefit for those in need. For individuals and families on the margins, these funds could prevent a downward spiral that would create even greater hardship and higher long-term costs for us all. The funds would avoid evictions, foreclosure, and utility cut-offs; prevent children from being removed from their homes; provide resources for families to buy necessities like food, diapers, and personal hygiene supplies; and prevent the mental and physical health issues that accompany extreme stress. Connecticut, like other states, is facing an upcoming end to the eviction moratorium on August 25.

We hope we can count on you to make sure that resources are included in the COVID-19 package to help individuals and families who have the least, many of whom are people of color. The Coronavirus Emergency Assistance Grant Program currently in the Pandemic TANF Assistance Act would meet those needs. Thank you for being a champion for families and individuals with the lowest incomes whose needs are too often forgotten during times of crisis.

Sincerely,

Shelley White
New Haven Legal Assistance Association

Kristen Noelle Hatcher
Connecticut Legal Services

Alison M. Weir
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

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i Connecticut Department of Labor, Labor Market Information, June 18, 2020 available at https://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/unemprateCTUS.asp


