

TESTIMONY REGARDING REPEAL OF WELFARE LIENS IN CT

Good morning, Madam Chair/Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

My name is Debra Cantor, and I am the rabbi of B'nai Tikvoh-Sholom, a synagogue in Bloomfield, and Director of the Neshama Center for Lifelong Learning, a community-wide Jewish learning initiative serving people of all faiths and backgrounds.

I am here today to advocate for the repeal of the draconian policy of welfare liens in the State of CT. I speak today not as an expert in public policy or legal matters, but as a rabbi, from the core of my religious tradition.

On Yom Kippur morning, the holiest day of the Jewish year, when Jews all over the world sit in the synagogue all through the day, praying and fasting and engaging in rigorous repentance and self-reflection - on that day, when we are deeply engaged in the rites and rituals of the Day of Atonement, we hear the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah.

And this is what Isaiah asks us on that holy day:

Is such the fast I desire,

A day for people to starve their bodies?

Bowing the head like a bulrush

And lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Do you call that a fast,

A day when the LORD is favorable?

Rather, declares the prophet,

this is the fast God desires:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness,

And untie the cords of the yoke

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To let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke...

To feed the hungry, take in the homeless, to provide sanctuary and safety, and not to ignore the needs of our brothers and sisters.

...To Clear a pathway

To remove all obstacles

From the road of My people!

Today, the words of the ancient prophet reverberate. For we wrestle with the same questions as Isaiah did long ago. What does our faith demand of us? How do we build a just, compassionate community? How do we act – as individuals and as a society – to repair what is broken, to remove obstacles from the path, especially the path of those most in need?

To be clear, the work of pursuing justice, the urgent task of *tikkun olam* – fixing up the world – is not accomplished by high flung oratory; it requires concrete, deliberate actions.

And that is what I present to you today. The opportunity to right a wrong, to change a policy which hurts some of the most vulnerable among us, which places obstacles in their path to a better future, which blocks the road out of poverty.

Welfare leins hang over the heads of those who have needed basic assistance to survive and to get back on their feet. They often come as a shock to people who are finally managing to move forward; they are passed down from generation to generation, and they

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rely on the poor to balance the budget of a state with one of the highest per capita incomes in the country.

Welfare leins fly in the face of the whole purpose of the Dept of Social Services, which has committed itself – and us - to “provide person-centered programs and services to enhance the well-being of individuals, families and communities” in order to ensure a “Connecticut where all have the opportunity to be healthy, secure and thriving.”

Repealing welfare leins will neither bring an end to poverty nor to the vast economic inequality in our state. But repeal *will* fix one broken piece of the puzzle. Repealing this policy will right a social wrong, and help bring stability and self-sufficiency to folks who desperately need it. Repeal, to use Isaiah’s words, will remove an obstacle and clear a pathway.

I urge you to act.