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Testimony for HB 485
By Jack Frech
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Job and Family Services

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 485.

As you know, this bill creates an Office of Innovation within the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. It also spells out the goals that this office is expected to achieve. While the goals stated in the bill are admirable, there is one omission that I feel needs to be addressed. I propose that language be added to Section 1 (C) (1) that would state “and to assure that the basic human needs are met for all Ohioans”.

It is impossible to fully develop our workforce and thereby end poverty if any of our fellow Ohioans are hungry or homeless. Many interventions that are likely to be included in this plan or proposed in this legislation, regarding education, job training, substance abuse and mental health treatment will not work for people whose basic needs are not being met. These people spend all of their time and energy trying to feed, clothe and house themselves and their families. Every day is about survival. Little time is left for longer-term interventions.

Common sense and human decency would call on us to include this language in our goals. Our current safety net assistance programs, Ohio Works First cash assistance and SNAP, which already provided only meager benefits, have been severely cut leaving hundreds of thousands of Ohioans struggling to meet their basic needs for food and shelter. These cuts have been intentional and carried out with frightening efficiency. I know firsthand, it has been my job to carry out these cuts in assistance. Repressive work policies in the OWF program and federal SNAP benefits reduction have resulted in an annual loss of benefits of more than \$570 million a year from the poorest families and the poorest communities in the state.

- OWF benefits are low, a single “child only” case receives only \$277 a month and a single mother with two children would receive only \$465. 70% of all OWF cases are “child only,” which means that the child is usually not living with either biological parent.
- 100,000 recipients have been cut off the Ohio Works First program since January 2011, including 60,000 children. This represents over a 44% cut in the OWF caseload. The

caseload has dropped in 35 out of 36 months and continues to drop.

- The cut in OWF benefits has resulted in a loss of \$166 million a year in benefits to the poorest families with children in the state.
- According to a study of the OWF work program by the Public Consulting Group, funded by ODJFS, the work participation goals were met through caseload reduction not job placement. Similarly a recent report on Ohio's Work Incentive Program for OWF recipients showed that very few recipients had actually been placed in jobs.
- Cuts in the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) have resulted in a 12% reduction in benefits over the past three years. The average per person/per month benefit has dropped from \$138 to \$121. These cuts have reduced the amount of food assistance for poor families in Ohio by over \$407 million per year. (The cuts were a combination of changes in the standard utility allowances and the early elimination of stimulus funding.)
- The US Department of Agriculture reports in its 2012 Annual Quality Control report that 21% of Ohio SNAP households have no cash income. This would indicate that there are more children living in families receiving SNAP benefits only, with no cash income, than remain on the OWF program. That means they have no money for rent, utilities, transportation, hygiene products, diapers, over-the-counter medication, clothes, laundry soap, or anything else you cannot buy with SNAP benefits. SNAP benefits are only intended to provide about 75% of the food a family needs and without any cash there is nothing to make up the other 25%.

I have attached a chart that shows the reduction in OWF and SNAP assistance by county from January 2011 to January 2014. The reduction in total monthly benefits during that time when annualized equates to over \$570 million per year. That is a huge loss of money from the poorest households and communities in the state. The growth in families who are homeless, doubled and tripled up in housing, the increased demand on soup kitchens and food pantries, increased substance abuse, increased infant mortality, increased decline for minority children and other obvious signs of real despair are unmistakable. Suffering that is all quite intentional and unnecessary.

Please keep in mind the aforementioned cuts to benefits do not include imminent drops as a result of the ABAWD waiver issue or the soon-to-be initiated tightening of unemployment compensation eligibility.

In my forty years of experience of working with poor families in Ohio, I have never seen the situation for poor families this bad.

Adding the goal of meeting all Ohioans basic human needs seems like a small but obviously necessary step to show that we are now actually going to live up to the values we have so long espoused- to value families, to protect children, and to love our neighbors as we do ourselves.

