

**Testimony of the  
Office for Family Independence  
Department of Health and Human Services**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on  
Health and Human Services**

**For LD 1343  
An Act To Improve Work Readiness for Families Facing Significant Barriers to  
Employment**

**Sponsored by Speaker Mark Eves**

May 3, 2013

Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Dale Denno, Director of the Office for Family Independence in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). I am here today to speak for LD 1343, *An Act To Improve Work Readiness for Families Facing Significant Barriers to Employment*.

The Department recognizes the need for improvement around services to prepare our TANF adults for employment. The Office for Family Independence began strategic planning efforts in the fall of 2012 to identify gaps and to target areas ripe for such improvement. These strategic initiatives have been undertaken in conjunction with partners who often serve the same population; specifically the Department of Labor and the Department of Education.

The three Departments, with the active participation and encouragement of Commissioners Mayhew, Paquette and Bowen, have developed a unified vision and a coordinated plan of action for retooling and reenergizing our TANF ASPIRE program. The purpose of this work is to partner in efforts toward enhanced work skills development and actively connecting people with jobs. Key to this work, and supported by this LD, is the ability to provide ASPIRE participants with a thorough assessment identifying their skills and strengths as well as any impairments or barriers that affect work readiness.

The resulting work plan that has been developed by this Tri-Department workgroup includes specific objectives, tasks and outcome measures. The first major initiative involves outsourcing vocational assessment services in order to assure an assessment with the breadth and depth needed for actionable employment plans. The proposals for this contracted service will be

submitted to the Department by May 2, with an expected contract date of July 1, 2013 and a service start date of October 1, 2013. The results and recommendations from these assessments will enable ASPIRE staff to immediately engage each TANF adult in meaningful employment, training, and barrier resolution activities. If the results of an individual's assessment indicate a need for a subsequent or clinical assessment, the individual will have the option of accepting a referral for such a service.

One area of concern in the existing language of this LD is around the ability of the Department to hold participants accountable for failing to comply with the steps necessary to complete their assessment. The current language states "A participant identified as qualifying for the comprehensive screening and assessment under this subsection may not be sanctioned for failing to comply with an assigned activity until assessment results are received and reviewed by the department". An "assigned activity" may include attendance at assessment appointments. A completed assessment is critical to meaningful engagement of TANF adults and their preparation for independence from TANF. The Department must have the ability to hold people accountable for attending their scheduled assessment appointments.

OFI is willing to continue work with the sponsor to amend the language of LD1343 so the effects don not conflict with the goals of our ASPIRE initiatives.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and to make myself available for questions at the work session.