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Testimony in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Health and Human Services Committee
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I thank the chair and the committee for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Eric Cytryn, and I am the Rabbi at Beth El Temple in Harrisburg. I am a member of the Jewish Faith's Conservative Movement and belong to the Rabbinical Assembly of America. I am also a member of JSPAN.

I write to you as a Rabbi from the Jewish Community in Harrisburg representing Jewish values and tradition held in great esteem throughout our diverse Pennsylvania Jewish Community.

Jewish Tradition demands strong communal support for the poor and needy. Our tradition seeks to guard against poor and needy people becoming marginalized by the majority who are able to care for themselves without civic aid.

In the Five Books of Moses, our Torah, God commands us to give back to the community. In Hebrew this act is called "Tzedakah" which does not mean "charity" but rather "just/righteous giving," where "just" is used in the sense of "justice," expressing the importance of this value within our community. When Jews read the Bible's commandment, "Justice, justice shall you pursue" we understand that we are being commanded to give financially to the community so that those less fortunate than we are today do not suffer from or, God forbid, die of neglect.

Because God commands us to be compassionate and merciful, we have a responsibility to respond actively (and not only prayerfully-spiritually) to our neighbor's distress. This includes issues of health, spiritual, emotional and physical well being and certainly economic well being. During the centuries different Jewish spiritual leaders have articulated the rules, or standards for "justice giving."

The most well known Rabbi who codified rules for this "justice giving" prioritized eight ways one could fulfill the commandment to give, and these eight remain the standard for giving within the Jewish Community today. We begin with the person who resents the commandment but realizes he must fulfill it: he gives begrudgingly. The next level gives less than she should, but with a smile on her face. And so on, three through seven, lower expectations to higher expectations. Finally, the eighth and highest level is the person who, through their gift, empowers the needy to leave his needy status and become self-reliant. To hand someone a gift, or a loan, or perhaps to enter into a partnership with her or even find a job for her so that she will never have to beg again is the highest form of giving within the Jewish tradition.

In Harrisburg, our Jewish Family and Children's Services not only does direct providing of services for Jewish and non-Jewish clients, but they also manage a Food Bank which supplies observant Jews with Kosher food and the non-observant with general nourishment. In addition, Jewish congregations have annual food drives for the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Each of the five congregational Rabbis in the

community can attest to the increased requests for gifts (“justice giving”) of money for rent and electric, gas, medical and other necessary costs people incur because of the downturn in the economy and the significant numbers of people out of work. Would that any of us could find jobs, give significant loans or enter into partnerships with those in need. Alas, we have only limited funds, all donations, at our disposal.

This triage of need and response speaks directly to this Committee’s task at hand because bringing back the Asset Test to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, will hurt families and seniors who are striving to better their lives and become more self-sufficient. The Asset Test does not take into account catastrophic health issues that take large sums of money to correct, nor does it take into account the idea that families might be able to save a little money on food purchases which can place them on firmer ground regarding their monthly and annual bills.

In addition, Jewish tradition commands the giver not to question the veracity of the request; we must not harass a poor person by asking just how much they earn, or why they haven’t found work, or other questions that might be embarrassing to them. To humiliate someone is akin to murdering them, our ancestors teach us, and this applies to anyone you embarrass. Thus I would urge the committee not to reinstate the Asset Test because this will further serve to embarrass, humiliate and hurt the poor and needy in our commonwealth.

This above is a Jewish values reading of the suggested change in the program’s accessibility.

Respectfully submitted,
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