

NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

County Government with a Unified Voice!

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May 16, 2012

Honorable Ronald Rice
Senator, District 28
1044 South Orange Avenue, 4th Floor
Newark, New Jersey 07106

RE: SENATE BILL NO. 1401

Dear Senator Rice:

On behalf of the New Jersey Association of Counties (NJAC), I am reaching out to you regarding our concerns with the provisions of Senate Bill No. 1401. As you are aware, this legislation makes various modifications and revisions to the statutorily prescribed duties of county officials that are engaged in the administration of welfare services. This bill is scheduled for consideration by the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee on Thursday, May 17, 2012.

Specifically, the bill calls upon each county welfare director to provide regular reports to the State Department of Human Services regarding motels and hotels utilized by the county welfare agency for temporary emergency housing. In addition, the legislation requires county officials to visit recipients, at least every three months, at each such facility to determine whether emergency assistance recipients are receiving "needed" services, to coordinate the provision of other services to recipients and to identify potentially unsafe or unsanitary living conditions at temporary emergency housing units. Finally, the bill mandates every county welfare agency to provide information to emergency assistance recipients regarding the locations and times that mobile health vans will be administering services within the county. The counties must also provide notification of such information to providers of social services and shelter services within the county.

While the Association strongly supports the objective of this legislation, which is to improve the living conditions of welfare recipients who are placed in temporary housing, we are concerned that the significant additional burdens imposed upon county human services employees through this bill will jeopardize the ability of these individuals to perform other required functions and deliver other essential welfare related services. For instance, the

requirement that county officials make physical visits to temporary emergency housing units on a regular basis will undoubtedly take employees of county welfare agencies away from other prescribed duties. Thus, in order to ensure that the mandates of S-1401 are met, counties will be required to hire additional personnel, cease the delivery of other welfare related services, or in some cases, do both.

Moreover, the bill's requirement that employees of county welfare agencies identify "unsafe or unsanitary living conditions" at temporary emergency housing units imposes responsibilities upon county human services employees that they may be unqualified to perform. In many instances, the proper identification of such conditions will require technical expertise and training, which will further increase the cost of fulfilling the bill's mandates. Additionally, the bill currently fails to identify what constitutes "unsafe or unsanitary." As it stands, the vague nature of the term "unsafe or unsanitary" raises new and significant liability issues for county human services employees.

Finally, while the bill calls for reimbursement by the State for the administrative costs incurred by county welfare agencies in providing the services outlined in the bill on behalf of municipalities in a county who self administers their general assistance program, the vast majority of municipalities in New Jersey have consolidated their general assistance programs under the county umbrella, leaving very few cases to even be eligible for administrative reimbursement. The bill also fails to allocate any additional revenue to counties so that they may hire the additional staff needed and train their human services employees in order to provide the significant additional services mandated by this bill.

Once again, NJAC firmly believes that the goals of this legislation are laudable and commends you for your tireless efforts to improve the quality of life for recipients of emergency assistance. However, we would respectfully request that you consider amending the bill to address the serious liability issues that have been raised, as well as include a funding mechanism that will generate recurring revenues to offset the costs incurred by county governments in fulfilling the bill's mandates.

Thank you for your consideration of NJAC's comments. Please do not hesitate to contact me at (609) 394-3467 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Allen Weston
Legislative Director

c. Members, Senate Health, Human Services & Senior Citizens Committee