

TESTIMONY OF ELAINE ALBOM BRAFFMAN-H.R.05217: Feb. 24, 2006

Good Afternoon: Representative Lawlor, Rep. Spallone, Rep. Farr and other Honored Members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Elaine Albom Braffman of Woodbridge and I am honored to appear before you today. As president of the Connecticut Magistrates' Association, representing the seventy four Superior Court magistrates, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of H.B. 05217 which, if passed, would raise the pay of Small Claims and Motor Vehicle Magistrates for the first time in twenty one years.

What is most important for the honored members of this committee to understand is that Small Claims Court and Motor Vehicle Court are courts of first impression for many Connecticut citizens: these courts are their primary interaction with Connecticut's judicial system. I cannot emphasize enough that the Small Claims or Motor Vehicle Court experience may color our citizens' view of the entire judicial process-for better or worse.

In Small Claims Court, ordinary people come before us with their problems-credit card problems, problems with electricians, with neighbors, with family members. Many litigants appear *pro se*, are confused, nervous, may speak and read English poorly and are ignorant of legal procedure. Magistrates must be sensitive to their needs yet fairly administer justice and interpret the law while handling a docket that may contain over 50 contested cases on any day in a crowded courtroom often without clerks or marshals or interpreters.

The Judicial Committee has a right to demand that magistrates treat our citizens fairly, with dignity and respect, and administer the law in an impartial yet efficient manner. We are being asked to handle dockets which can easily have over 75 cases a session; we are being asked to work without clerks and marshals, to be sensitive to our litigants' needs, to be fair, respectful and just. We are also being asked to handle increasingly complex matters as the jurisdictional limit of Small Claims has been raised to \$5000.

In return, we are asking the Judiciary Committee to consider our needs. We are *per diem* workers-this means we receive no health benefits, no car allowance, no sick days, no workers' compensation coverage. We have not received a raise in almost **twenty one** years: morale among magistrates is at an all time low and it's fair to say that the General Assembly's failure to raise our pay in 21 years is demoralizing. A pay raise would tell us you recognize the importance of our work, the pressured circumstances in which we work and the problems we face administering justice under very difficult conditions.

Speaking as President of the Connecticut Magistrates' Association and as a magistrate for over 20 years, I hope that this is the year the legislature will acknowledge the magistrates' role and our contributions to the fair administration of justice in Connecticut. I am asking you to pass H.R. 05217 as written and to give us a long overdue, much deserved pay raise. Thank you for giving me this time to present the magistrates' viewpoint. I appreciate your attention today and welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have of me.