

Good afternoon members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today in support of Proposed Bill No. 6639 concerning credit in the state employees state retirement system for hazardous duty service for Public Defender investigators.

My name is Arthur Forst. I have been employed as an Investigator for the Public Defender's office for approximately 13 years. As an investigator, I am often placed in hazardous situations. My duties as an investigator include, but are not limited to, interviewing clients, defendants, witnesses, and victims wherever they can be found. This often includes crack houses, known gang hangouts, courthouse lockup areas, prisons, and known dangerous neighborhoods. I am responsible for serving subpoenas and other legal paperwork. I never know what is on the other side of the door as I knock. Is the person answering the door high on narcotics, have outstanding warrants, or just simply afraid of who is at their doorstep? I am not permitted to carry weapons, and I'm usually working alone with no backup as an option. I have interviewed clients with severe mental illness, including schizophrenia, bi-polar, and mentally challenged individuals.

My job has endangered myself and my family. In 1995, I received a bomb threat at my home. My wife, seven months pregnant at the time, and my entire neighborhood was evacuated for several hours while the State Police Bomb Squad searched my vehicle and my residence for the alleged bomb. The New London States Attorney's office, CT State Police and Coventry Police investigated the incident. I am quite sure that a disgruntled public defender client was responsible.

I am constantly on the road searching for witnesses across the state and country. I've located and interviewed a homeless witness in Hollywood, Florida, alone in a back street alley in a tough neighborhood. I have searched for witnesses and served subpoenas on weekends and at night alone. I have had exposure to defendants with confirmed cases of active tuberculosis, Hepatitis, and HIV over my 13 years in this position. As a former law enforcement officer, my duties as a Public Defender investigator are equally hazardous.

Public Defender investigators are already considered hazardous duty employees by statute by the State of CT legislature if hurt or killed on the job. However, Public Defender investigators are not offered the benefit of a hazardous duty retirement.

You might ask why I would continue in a profession with such known dangers to myself and my family. I firmly believe that indigent people are entitled to the best defense available. I thoroughly enjoy being a champion for the underprivileged and downtrodden. As Public Defender investigators, we help protect the constitutional rights of the indigent defendant.

Given the dangers we face daily, I ask for your support for the Proposed Bill No. 6639 allowing Public Defender investigators to receive hazardous duty service credit in the state employee's retirement system.

On behalf of the State of CT Public Defender investigators, I would like to thank you for your time, consideration, and support in our efforts to recognize the hazardous work related situations we face daily.