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H.B. 6375 -- Termination of state boards and programs

Government Administration and Elections Committee public hearing -- March 16, 2009
Testimony of Raphael L. Podolsky

Recommended Committee action: REJECTION OF THE BILL

This bill proposes the termination of 62 state boards and programs. I do not purport to be familiar with most of them, but I can say with certainty that the wholesale termination of boards and programs, without individual study and evaluation, is not a good idea and will deprive the state of important resources, much of which come at no cost whatsoever to the state. A sunset system makes sense only if done in conjunction with thoughtful sunset reviews of each agency, which ought to be conducted by the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee. In the absence of such review, all boards and programs scheduled for sunset this year should be renewed. Even if some of those boards are dormant, there is no harm that will come to the state as a result of renewal. At such time as the General Assembly is prepared to conduct a serious review, then such reviews should take place on a case-by-case basis.

There are, however, three boards and one program with which I am familiar, and I would like to address them specifically. All four should be retained.

(1) Citizens Advisory Council for Housing Matters (C.G.S. 47a-71a -- lines 21-22): This board reviews the operations of the state's housing courts and provides advice and critique to the Chief Court Administrator, the Chief State's Attorney, and to a lesser extent to the Governor and the General Assembly. It is not only volunteer but uses no agency personnel for staffing purposes and thus imposes no costs on the state. Members, who represent a mixture of landlord, tenant, and other interests in housing, are neither compensated nor reimbursed. The board was created in 1978 when the first housing court was created as an integral part of the Housing Court Act and has operated continuously ever since. It was an early advocate for simplified forms and successfully pressed for their use in the housing courts long before the Judicial Branch recognized their value throughout the judicial system. It submits extensive reports biennially and has done so since 1981. Its 2009 report is posted at www.ct.gov/eecd/lib/eecd/housing_reports/cac-2009_final. It has also produced a detailed booklet on housing issues in the small claims courts which is used by the Judicial Branch to train small claims magistrates and, working with the Chief State's Attorney's Office, has helped draft guidelines for housing prosecutors and a training manual on housing law for police officers. I strongly believe that its on-going input has made for a better and more user-friendly housing court system.¹

(2) Child Support Guidelines Commission (C.G.S. 46b-215a -- lines 106-107): This board revises the Child Support Guidelines every four years. Atty. Lucy Potter of Greater

¹I have been a member of this board as a representative of tenants since its inception and am presently its chairperson.

Hartford Legal Aid has been a member of the Commission for many years. Members of the Commission are not paid. The guidelines issued by the Commission are used both in ordinary family cases in the courts and, more important, for setting child support orders in the Title IV-D system, through which the state collects millions of dollars of child support both for custodial parents and for itself (as reimbursement for state TFA welfare benefits). The existence of the Commission and the quadrennial revisions of the Guidelines are mandated by federal law; and the termination of the Commission would put millions of dollars of federal matching funds at risk. As a practical matter, I do not believe that this board can be terminated without severe financial repercussions.

(3) Mobile Manufactured Home Advisory Council (C.G.S. 21-84a -- lines 45-46): This very active advisory board, which meets every two months, was created in the early 1980s at the time that the mobile home park statutes were revised to provide greater protections for mobile home park residents and to promote the treatment of mobile home parks as housing (i.e., real property) rather than as "trailer parks." It also serves as a mechanism by which policy issues related to mobile home parks can be discussed and negotiated by park owners and park residents (four park owners and four park residents are among the members of the board). It has been very successful in working out disputes between those interests and has allowed both park owners and park residents to come to the General Assembly together on mobile home park issues that would previously have been contentious. Members are not compensated.

(4) State-Assisted Housing Sustainability Fund (C.G.S. 8-37yy – lines 88-89): This Fund, along with a related advisory council, was created in 2007 as part of an effort to begin the process of revitalizing the 17,000 units of housing in the state-assisted portfolio, most of which are owned and operated by housing authorities and many of which are in severe need of deferred maintenance and substantial rehabilitation. The two largest parts of the portfolio are family public housing (known as State Moderate Rental Housing) and senior/disabled public housing (known as State Elderly Housing). Unlike federal public housing, in which the federal government provides operating subsidies, there are no operating subsidies in the state public housing system, resulting in years of underfunding and deferred maintenance. The Fund was seeded in 2007 with \$10 million from the state surplus but can receive money from other sources. The existing budget crisis has blocked the growth of the Fund, but it remains an appropriate structure for targeting future funds for preservation of the state-assisted portfolio. It should not be abolished.