



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
for the Government Administration and Elections Committee
March 16, 2009

Submitted by James D. McGaughey
Executive Director

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to comment on several of the bills on the agenda for today's public hearing: **Governor's Bills No. 839, An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidation of Various State Agencies; and No. 840, An Act Concerning the Elimination of the Office of Consumer Counsel, Office of the Healthcare Advocate, the Office of Ombudsman for Property Rights and Certain Legislative Commissions.** Taken together, these bills consolidate the assignments and support responsibilities for a number of small, autonomous or semi-autonomous State commissions, boards and offices within various larger departments, and in some cases eliminate those entities altogether.

Our Office has had no dealings with many of the entities these bills would consolidate and/or eliminate, and there is no doubt a sound, rational basis for many of the changes being proposed. However, we are concerned that these bills also call for elimination of several independent advocacy agencies that provide important safeguarding functions. Over the years our agency's information and referral staff has referred many individuals with disabilities and their families to the Office of the Healthcare Advocate, the Office of the Child Advocate and the Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman for advanced problem-solving assistance in their respective areas of expertise. If these entities did not exist, many people struggling with the bureaucratic complexities inherent in health care and human service systems would have no place to turn at their time of greatest need. The staff of these agencies are consumer allies – independent, experienced advocates who know the ropes, and can often cut through red tape and hold institutional care providers, insurance companies and the child welfare system to the promises and policies they issue.

While I appreciate that the fiscal crisis confronting us is extraordinary, it is precisely at times such as these that independent safeguarding programs are most needed. The cutbacks, consolidations and organizational stresses affecting health and human service programs as they try to cope with diminishing resources will inevitably produce unanticipated consequences. Human service history yields many examples where budget cuts have led to neglectful conditions, sometimes with tragic consequences. Consumer access to independent advocacy has been shown to make a real difference, both for individuals who are directly impacted by unfair decisions, practices and circumstances, and for the overall health and responsiveness of our service systems.

In comparison to the significant resources required to fund direct service programs, society does not invest very much in independent, rights-based advocacy. It is important, however, to protect that small investment, especially in hard times. I would urge the Committee to recognize the expertise these advocacy agencies represent as a precious asset – one that it is decidedly in the public interest to preserve.

Thank you for your attention. If there are any questions, please let me know and I will try to answer them.

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