

Testimony in Support of Raised Bill 6702: An Act Concerning Public Access to Proceedings in Certain Juvenile Matters

Thursday, March 26, 2009

Submitted by: Colin Poitras

Greetings Sen. MacDonald, Rep. Lawlor, Sen. Handley, Rep. Fox and all of the members of the Judiciary Committee.

I am writing to you today to express my support for **Raised Bill 6702: An Act Concerning Public Access to Proceedings in Certain Juvenile Matters**.

As a former reporter for the **Hartford Courant**, I covered child abuse and neglect in the state of Connecticut for approximately seven of the past eight years. During that time, I had numerous interactions with all aspects of Connecticut's child welfare system including: the Department of Children and Families; Office of the Child Advocate; Court Support Services; the Connecticut Juvenile Training School; Riverview Hospital and numerous other private providers and entities.

I repeatedly heard complaints about a lack of quality legal representation for children in the Superior Courts for Juvenile Matters. There are underpaid, overworked and inadequately trained lawyers who advise the court and make critical, life-altering decisions on behalf of traumatized children they have met only a few minutes before. This can no longer be tolerated.

I have listened to the heartfelt pleas of child advocates frustrated by their inability to get the state to locate a timely placement for a child; to provide proper, gender-specific mental health and behavioral health counseling to abused boys and girls; to develop a feasible and aggressive treatment plan so that a child can leave an institutional setting or foster care and either start a life on their own or be placed with a permanent loving family in a private home.

One of the most powerful statements I ever heard during my time covering child abuse and neglect in Connecticut came from former Juan F. Court Monitor Ray Sirry who determined, through his independent research and oversight, that the mental and emotional health of Connecticut's abused and neglected children was actually deteriorating due to the institutional delays, the lack of aggressive action and the dearth of appropriate care inherent in Connecticut's child welfare system.

Connecticut is actually hurting its children, Sirry said, by failing to provide them a permanent home and by allowing them to languish for years in institutions and temporary, state-subsidized foster care.

I firmly believe that **Raised Bill 6702**, with its carefully constructed checks and balances, will improve the efficiency, the professionalism and the quality of services provided by the state's Superior Courts for Juvenile Matters. It will provide much-needed professional accountability and transparency so that the children of Connecticut and their families will be properly served. I dare say it is action long overdue.

Raised Bill 6702 is not breaking new ground. Connecticut would be following the lead of an increasing number of states who have opened their juvenile courts in recent years. I know the great fear is that opening the juvenile courts will somehow cause great harm to children who have already experienced horrible traumas in their lives. But I ask you to consider what is in place now and the slow-torture these children are currently experiencing because of a faulty system that fails to meet their needs in a proper and timely manner. I ask you to think for a moment and imagine it was your son, your daughter, your niece, your nephew languishing for months or years in an adult prison or large institution like Riverview Hospital or the Juvenile Training School because the state's child welfare system was simply moving too slowly, too inefficiently to provide them adequate attention and care.

To my knowledge, there has not been a single documented case where a child has been irreparably harmed by opening child protection proceedings. To the contrary, it is my firm hope and belief that the children of the state of Connecticut will be rewarded by such an act. I hope that it will increase public awareness of child protection issues and propel legal advocates to receive proper training and to be more vigilant in representing their young clients. I hope that it will spur state officials and private service providers to work more closely together to provide prompt, adequate services in the best interest of the child.

Lastly, as a former professional journalist with more than 20 years experience at the Hartford Courant, I would like to say that I believe that professional journalists will respect the laws and regulations of this state and its courts and will not divulge details in these cases that are protected under this Act. I can think of multiple instances of 'self-censorship' in the media today that take place as a matter of routine – protecting the identities of sexual assault victims for instance, or protecting the identities of juveniles who run afoul of the law – and I believe

Connecticut's media will readily abide by the guidelines set forth in **Raised Bill 6702** as well.

I therefore urge the members of this legislative body to **SUPPORT Raised Bill 6702** on behalf of Connecticut's abused and neglected children, who are relying on **you** in this case to act in their best interest.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colin Poitras". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Colin Poitras

Manchester, CT

