



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

March 26, 2009

Members of the Committee

**Re: Testimony of Diane Whitney, Chair of Greater Hartford Legal Aid before the
Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut Legislature**

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Diane Whitney; I am Chair of the Board of Greater Hartford Legal Aid and a partner at Pullman & Comley, LLC. With me are Attorney Aaron Bayer, Chair of the Board of Connecticut Legal Services and Attorney Diane Polan, Chair of the Board of New Haven Legal Assistance.

You are hearing from many deserving entities asking for funding. We are here to tell you how deserving and how desperate the situation is for legal aid in Connecticut.

Our three legal aid organizations coordinate our work to cover the entire state of Connecticut. We handle over 15,000 cases per year, which affect more than four times that number of people. Our clients are desperate people; people who are losing their homes, who are the victims of domestic violence, who have no food or medical services, whose children are being thrown out of school, who are not being paid for work they are doing, who have no idea what resources are available to help them make it through the day.

We want you to understand that we not only help our clients survive and maintain some level of dignity, we save the state money. A client who can keep his or her life together is a productive member of society, not someone who needs additional support at state expense. That is what we help our clients achieve.

And we are now in crisis. The state of Connecticut supports legal aid largely with IOLTA funds, but that system has now collapsed. IOLTA revenues, which had been 2/3 of legal aid funding have dropped over 80%. The Connecticut Bar Foundation is spending out its reserves, and even with that has had to cut the grants to legal aid by 50%. Our system, always an efficient one where every penny counts, is now on the brink of devastation. We have responded by increasing our fundraising efforts, which, though likely to be fairly successful, will not come close to filling our \$9 Million gap, and by seriously cutting costs. Our attorneys, always underpaid by any measure, have agreed to significant cuts in their pay and benefits; things like seminars and out-of-state travel are gone, and both attorneys and staff have been laid off, which is extraordinarily painful.

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

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Legal aid attorneys are passionate about what they do for their clients – that is why they are legal aid attorneys. What hurts now, even more than the significant impact on their personal finances, is that the needs of their clients are not being met. Legal aid already has to turn away many clients because the resources are not there to serve all who need help; with the cuts in place now and the additional cuts probably coming, fewer clients will be served at just the time when need are increasing dramatically.

Connecticut's legal aid organizations are effective, coordinated and efficient. They are well-supported by Connecticut's private attorneys and by other grant-making entities, but those sources cannot support the entire structure. We need a new source of funding and ask that you consider using the increase in attorney occupational tax and in Superior Court filing fees to help meet our very serious funding gap at this time.

We very much appreciate your thoughtful consideration of our situation and are eager to work with you to solve what we consider a serious problem for the poor in Connecticut.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Diane Whitney". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name.

Diane W. Whitney