

**COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING FEBRUARY 23, 2009**

**TESTIMONY OF DOUGLAS J. MONAGHAN, ESQ.
IN SUPPORT BUDGET REQUEST OF
THE COMMISSION ON CHILD PROTECTION**

I am a solo practitioner with an office in Groton, Connecticut, in the practice of law for 28 years. I concentrate my practice in juvenile matters, primarily child protection cases. I serve as the secretary of the board of directors of the Juvenile Matters Trial Lawyers Association, with members who practice in every Superior Court for Juvenile Matters (SCJM) across the state. I am also a member of the Connecticut Bar Association, a member of its Committee on Children and the Law and a member of the New London County Bar Association.

I am here to support the budget request of the Chief Child Protection Attorney (hereinafter "CCPA"), Carolyn Signorelli. In this period of time when everyone is scrutinizing and slashing budgets, when the pressure is on you to find ways to allocate scarce taxpayer dollars, to cut programs that are not essential or are not working, I am here to emphasize the importance of the work of this Commission, and, in my opinion, the outstanding performance of the Commission through the work of the CCPA and her staff.

In my previous testimony before this and other legislative committees, I have stated repeatedly my belief that the most important work day in and day out in the courts of this state occurs in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. This is because the litigation that occurs in these courts is dynamic; the lives of children and families are affected daily by what goes on, or does not go on, in these courtrooms. Many times the decisions that occur on a daily basis have life-long, life altering effects. This court deals with the future of children and families in a way that most other courts do not. And these issues involve the most fundamental civil right we exercise: the right to family integrity.

You already recognize the importance of these issues because you give the Department of Children and Families (DCF) nearly one billion dollars to administer to the needs of the state's children and families. This year the legislature continues to wonder how to "fix" DCF and has already held hearings on DCF's organization, the problems and the many voices calling for reform. We who work in the trenches of child protection law believe that our advocacy for our clients, be they children or parents or guardians, constitute the front line of defense in holding DCF accountable for providing the services our clients are entitled to and the dignity and

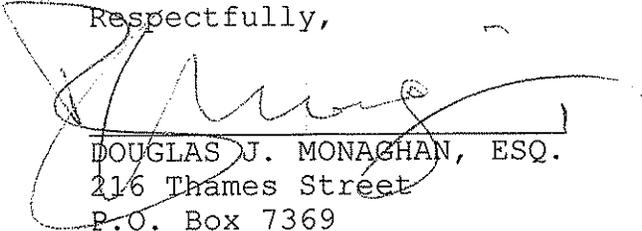
respect they deserve. The competent and zealous advocacy on behalf of children and parents by the attorneys hired and administered by the CCPA is a very important check on the actions and policies of the behemoth DCF.

As one who has been a vocal critic of the previous system of attorney appointments and compensation for juvenile court work, I am pleased to report that since taking office in 2006, Attorney Signorelli has measurably improved the representation of our clients. The CCPA has done this by issuing standards of practice, by reducing heavy caseloads, by conducting or arranging for pre-service or continuing legal education, by investigating and, for reasonable cause, terminating or not renewing the contracts of incompetent attorneys. The CCPA has provided substantive support to contract attorneys, providing guidance or directing attorneys to mentors, by facilitating the hiring of experts for assistance in defending cases and funding the issuance of subpoenas, and by providing direct liaison with DCF administrators and legal staff to work on systemic problems affecting our clients.

CCPA Signorelli also played a major part in establishing a certification program by which experienced child protection lawyers, after being subjected to peer review and passing a certification exam, can be certified as Child Welfare Law Specialists. Connecticut can be proud of the improvements being made to raise the level of advocacy on behalf of children and parents, and joins California, the District of Columbia, Iowa, Michigan, New Mexico, North Carolina, Tennessee and Utah as the only jurisdictions offering this certification.

Your inclination will be to reduce the CCPA's budget request, because that is what everyone expects in this time of budget crisis. The lawyers who work in this field have been ridiculously under compensated for years, and every time I appear before your committees, you always acknowledge this. The current hourly rate paid to attorneys who do this most important work is forty (\$40.00) per hour. The State of Connecticut is getting quality legal representation for Wal-Mart prices. It is an unbelievable value. Please approve CCPA Signorelli's budget request.

Respectfully,



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