



Office of The Attorney General
State of Connecticut

*TESTIMONY OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE
MARCH 16, 2009*

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 839, An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidations of Various State Agencies and Senate Bill 840, An Act Concerning the eliminations of the Office of Consumer Counsel, the Office of Healthcare Advocate, the Office of Ombudsman for Property Rights and Certain Legislative Commissions.

I urge the committee's rejection of proposals to eliminate the Offices of Consumer Counsel, the Healthcare Advocate and the Child Advocate. These agencies provide critical services on behalf of consumers, patients and children. If budget concerns are driving the proposal, it is doubly unfounded and futile, OCC and the OHA are not funded by the state general fund budget and therefore the proposed elimination of these agencies cannot meaningfully reduce the budget deficit.

I also urge rejection of the proposed across the board elimination of legislative commissions that provide critical input on public policy impacts concerning women, children and minorities -- the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, along with the African-American Affairs Commission, the Asian Pacific Americans Commission, the Commission on Aging, the Commission on Children and the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. They provide critical information and perspective as to real life effects on their communities. The General Assembly makes better policy decisions because of them.

I urge the committee to continue funding these commissions to ensure that our state policies are responsible and responsive.

Senate Bill 839 and the Governor's proposed budget consolidate the Office of the Child Advocate into the Office of the Attorney General, transferring all its functions but only 1 of the 10 employees. The Office of the Child Advocate has been a strong independent policy voice and effective watchdog. If anything, it should be strengthened with more resources -- adding to its investigators and child welfare specialist. My office and the Child Advocate have been partners and allies in critical investigations, imposing oversight and scrutiny.

Senate Bill 840 and the Governor's proposed budget also transfer all the statutory responsibilities of the Office of Consumer Counsel to my office. They fail to provide any resources, not to mention the 17 funded positions in the OCC or the funding for experts knowledgeable in utility industry finances and ratemaking. The work cannot be done without the

resources – skilled, experienced professionals who are essential to hold utilities accountable to consumers. Our offices work together, often on the same side of utility battles, but with distinct missions and mandates. Eliminating an independent OCC would be a great gift to utilities, and a profound disservice to ratepayers, who already are charged the highest electricity rates in the continental United States.

Finally and irresponsibly, Senate Bill 840 proposes to eliminate the Healthcare Advocate – which has assisted more than 2,000 individuals annually. These individuals are ill-served by their health insurer and unable to vindicate their rights. Our offices are allies and partners in this critical cause of enforcing patient rights and making the system responsive. With our help, many of these individuals successfully receive life-saving medical treatment prescribed by their health care provider.

The Office of Healthcare Advocate has also worked closely and collaboratively with my office jointly investigating unfair insurance practices new measures to protect consumers, including laws prohibiting insurers from unreasonably rescinding health insurance coverage after consumers file health insurance claims. We successfully advocated legislation to ensure proper coverage for necessary mental health services for children without requiring lengthy hospital stays.

While our offices have worked together on many issues, my office lacks sufficient resources to provide the additional advocacy work of the Healthcare Advocate. Eliminating that agency will deny thousands of citizens critical assistance in obtaining vital health care services.

Thank you.