

TESTIMONY OF DENNIS O'BRIEN ON HOUSE BILL 5148

Representative Lawlor, Senator McDonald and members of the Judiciary

Committee: I am Dennis O' Brien of the City of Willimantic and the Town of Windham, immediate past president of the Windham County Bar Association. I am Judge of the Probate Court of the District of Windham. I am also the administrative Judge of the Northeast Regional Children's Probate Court located in Willimantic and Brooklyn, CT.

I am here today to speak in support of House Bill No. 5148. This legislation is aimed at exempting the Judicial Branch from a requirement to reduce its other expenses account to the fiscal year 2007 level, and to revise the process with respect to recommended appropriations for, and the reduction of allotment requisitions by the Judicial Branch.

One of my main reasons for supporting this bill is that the people of the City of Willimantic and Town of Windham, which have already suffered many losses since the end of the industrial age and the loss of the American Thread Company and other major businesses, are now facing additional deprivation. Unless House Bill No. 5148 becomes law, the recently constructed Juvenile Court of Willimantic will be abandoned and relocated to the smaller Superior Court building in our town. The result will be the very sad end of the Superior Court and the Windham County Law Library in Willimantic,

Lawyers and more important, litigants, will be forced to travel all the way to Killingly and Putnam to attend and use the superior courts there. Killingly is more than a half hour's drive from Willimantic. The ride to Putnam, to where almost all Windham civil court business will be transferred, takes three quarters of an hour.

The Probate District in which I am judge is situated in the Windham Town Hall, a majestic brownstone built in 1895. High above the front door to our town hall is the inscription "Windham County Courthouse."

Until this serious threat to move the court out of our town, the superior court has always been in Willimantic, the county seat of Windham County. In recent years, great Supreme Court jurists, sons of Willimantic like Justice Joseph F. Dannehy, John Hamilton King and Alva Loiselle provided justice in the Superior Court in Willimantic. Superior Court abandonment of Willimantic dishonors the memory of these great men of the law, and many others who served before them.

As it has always been, Willimantic is the urban center of Northeast Connecticut, with a great hospital, Eastern Connecticut State University and a rich and proud history. Unlike many other places in our State, Willimantic is a place that welcomes everyone, rich and poor alike. Most of the area's neediest citizens make their home in our town.

As former director of litigation for Connecticut Legal Services, I know that our lower income citizenry use the courts with frequency. Many lack the means to travel all the way to Putnam and Killingly, and without a court in Willimantic, where one has always been, many will suffer dire and unfair consequences. The lot of the needy in our midst is difficult enough without making it worse by moving a sorely needed historic court far way.

I have had a long and satisfying career assisting the less fortunate as an attorney and a judge. More and more, the needy of all ages and all ethnic groups have become

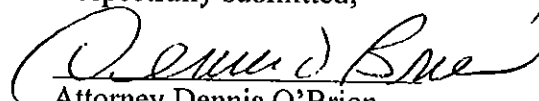
isolated in our urban centers. The overconcentration of the poor in our cities like Willimantic is not good for them or for the rest of us, who are left to bear the costs of being the State in which the gap between rich and poor grows faster than anywhere else.

It is time for us to put a stop to the rapid decline of our urban centers like Willimantic. Moving the Superior Court far away from Willimantic will do no one any good.

There is one more reason why I am here to support this bill. The bill would provide additional funding for legal services to the poor that is more badly needed than ever due to the huge decline of IOLTA funds distributed by the Connecticut Bar Foundation. As a former career legal services lawyer and longtime member of the Connecticut Bar Foundation Board of Directors, I am well aware of the vital role legal services plays in meeting the needs of the poor, especially senior citizens and children.

The enactment of House Bill No. 5148 can save our court in Willimantic and help secure legal services for the poor. I respectfully urge its passage.

Respectfully submitted,



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