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**Testimony of Katherine Webster-O'Keefe, President
Litchfield County Bar Association
Judicial Committee
House Bill 5148
An Act Concerning Funding for the Judicial Branch**

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear and comment on House Bill 5148, An Act Concerning Funding for the Judicial Branch.

My name is Katherine Webster-O'Keefe and I am the President of the Litchfield County Bar Association. I have practiced law in New Milford, CT since 1983 as a sole practitioner and in a 2-3 member firm. The members of our Bar are alarmed by the plans of the Judicial Branch to close the sole law library in our Judicial District and county.

We are a rural county with a population of nearly 200,000, from approximately 34 towns which covers 945 square miles. The county has no system of public transportation. Most of our lawyers are sole practitioners or from small law firms and rely upon the law library as our primary research resource as the cost to maintain a comprehensive library is prohibitive. For most the trip to the Litchfield courthouse takes at least 30 to 40 minutes. The need to travel to Waterbury or Danbury for legal research will be extremely costly and for many an impossibility. From Salisbury or Barkhamsted, Waterbury is a 70 minute trip each way, and even longer to Danbury.

Closing our law library will remove the most basic and most important tool used by the lawyer: books. The law is complex, constantly changing and requires continual research. It is

erroneous to believe that computers make adequate legal research tools available. They do not. Proper legal representation and judicial decision-making require treatises and other research tools to understand the depth, intricacies and history of distinct legal issues, laws and cases. Only a fraction of our resources are available by computer through the Connecticut Bar Association and other sources. Removal of the tools of our trade is like asking physician to perform surgery without proper diagnostic tools and equipment. And, almost none of the materials can be accessed online by the public, which includes an increasing population of self-represented persons who cannot afford legal counsel in the current times.

Those in need of legal services are dealing with the most important, and often traumatic, issues in their lives. Lawyers are held to high professional standards; we are charged with the duty to provide our clients with competent legal representation; we are expected to understand the legal complexities in their cases, as are the Judges are making decisions that impact their lives. Immediate access to the law library is often crucial during a trial or hearing, for both lawyers and judges, when it would be impossible to drive to another courthouse.

It is unacceptable to deny the citizens of Litchfield County and those who have matters in our courthouse, access to the law and to require the bench and bar to wing it on matters which have permanent consequences. We urge the General Assembly to restore adequate funding to the Judicial Branch so that the most basic and critical tools will be available to those in Litchfield County – to protect access to the courthouse and the laws under which their rights are protected and enforced. Depriving the citizens of Litchfield County access to the sole county law library will relegate them to substandard legal and judicial services, which in turn will erode confidence in the judicial system and irreparably damage individual rights.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.