

Windham County Bar Association



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Testimony of Giacomo "Jack" Guarnaccia, President Windham County Bar Association In support of House Bill 5148

Good morning, Senator MacDonald, Representative Lawlor, Senator Kissel, Representative O'Neill and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Jack Guarnaccia, and I am the President of the Windham County Bar Association. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee in these most difficult times as we all try to balance the present - and hopefully temporary - dire need for fiscal restraint, against the long-standing and salutary obligation of our society and government for the fair and equal administration of justice for all of our citizens.

I am here today to testify in favor of any and all legislative efforts to prevent the closure by the Judicial Department of the Courthouse for Juvenile Matters which is located at 81 Columbia Ave., Willimantic and the resulting transfer of those functions to the Courthouse for Civil and Family Matters located at Valley Street in Willimantic.

Because of the unique situation existing in Windham County, this proposed closure will have the triple negative effect of:

- (1) Diminishing the efficient delivery of services currently provided at the present Juvenile Court facilities if transferred to the Valley Street, Willimantic courthouse;
- (2) Diminishing the efficient delivery of services currently provided for the Civil and Family Divisions at Valley Street, Willimantic that will have to be re-located to Putnam and/or Danielson; and
- (3) Diminishing the efficient delivery of services currently provided at the facilities in Putnam and Danielson that will be negatively impacted as a result of the transfer of services out of the Willimantic Courthouse.

Windham County is a community that is of one of the:

- Poorest (in terms of income) in the State of Connecticut
- Least accessible (in terms of public transportation); and
- Most demanding (in terms of judicial services).

The Willimantic Juvenile Court building - which is only 10 years old - has been described by the Chief Court Administrator as "a modern spacious facility that serves the public well." Its closure will result in the relocation of the Juvenile Court to a 40+ year old facility that was not designed for - and is incompatible with - the unique demands of a Juvenile Court facility. It is inevitable that the quality of services now delivered to families and children in crisis will suffer as a result.

As a potential Juvenile Court facility, the Valley Street courthouse:

- Is under secured
- Is undersized
- Has inadequate parking; and
- Will require substantial, costly renovation to approximate the facilities it replaces.

The relocation of the Juvenile Court to the Valley Street Courthouse in Willimantic will further result in the displacement of a wide array of Superior Court services to the 50+ year-old courthouse in Putnam that is ill-equipped to receive them and is already short of space to serve the public. As a result, the quality of services delivered to the public at each facility will suffer.

Currently, the Valley Street Courthouse in Willimantic provides the following services for the Windham Judicial District on a regular (if not exclusive) basis:

- Civil short calendar
- Uncontested dissolutions of marriage
- Civil pre-trials
- Foreclosure mediations (which are among the most numerous in the State)
- Drug Intervention Program (a well-regarded and effective Program)
- Court-annexed Alternative Dispute Resolution (Fact-finding)
- Civil Mediation
- Family Support Magistrate proceedings (including Dept. of Social Services (Paternity) Docket)
- Court trials
- Civil trials (court and jury)

Moving these functions to the Putnam Courthouse – which is already utilized extensively for family matters and civil matters (including jury trials) – will challenge the personnel to find the time as well as the space to accommodate these needs. The inevitable competition for this limited available time and space will exact a cost on the quality and quantity of the services listed above that are now provided at the Valley Street Courthouse as well as those matters now heard exclusively in Putnam.

This is not simply a matter of moving a function (juvenile matters) from one building to another. Closing the Windham Juvenile Facility will cause extensive “collateral damage” to the delivery of judicial services throughout the Windham Judicial District. There will be an adverse “domino effect” impacting juvenile, civil and family matters on a large scale. It is the public who will suffer.

On behalf of the Windham County Bar Association and its membership, I urge this Committee and the General Assembly to consider all of the consequences - and exhaust all other options - before allowing this closure to be implemented.