

*Testimony in support of increased funding for the
Office of the Chief Child Protection Attorney*

*Submitted by Justine Rakich-Kelly
Executive Director*

My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly. I am the Executive Director of the Children's Law Center of Connecticut (CLC). My testimony is being submitted today in support of increasing funding for the Office of the Chief Child Protection Attorney ("CCPA").

The Children's Law Center of Connecticut is a non-profit organization whose mission is the legal representation of children in family court. In representing children, we use an attorney/social worker model. Our goal is to secure orders that foster positive, healthy and safe relationships between children and parents. Parents engaged in high conflict custody and visitation cases often lose sight of the psychological and, often, physical harm that is visited upon the child when he or she is caught up in the middle of warring parents.

*The CCPA is assigned the responsibility of ensuring that professionals representing children provide quality services in their advocacy. In this regard, CLC has worked with the CCPA and the Judicial Branch to create and participate in a 6 day training program for Attorneys and Guardians ad litem who wish to represent children in family court. This training program provides instruction to professionals about best practices in the field. A direct result of this training was unanticipated increased expenses. There are now more professionals trained to provide representation for children. Those professionals are doing more preparation for court and creating stronger relationships with the child clients and their parents. **While costs may be incurred up front, the result is a more efficient court process and court orders that stand the test of time, ultimately preventing the revolving door of the court which is often the most damaging and costly in these high conflict cases.***

The Children's Law Center is a case in point. In 99% of our cases, recommendations which are based on many hours of investigation and negotiation are incorporated into the Court's orders. Fewer than 15% of our families return to court after those orders are entered.

The short fall in the CCPA budget has resulted in a fee cap of \$1000 per case. For family court attorneys, who are paid \$40 per hour, this translates to 25 hours per case. It is not feasible or advisable to spend so little time working with a high conflict family in this process. In fact, I submit, it is tantamount to malpractice. Thus, we continue to work and when we inevitably exceed the 25 hour cap, we work for free. The fee cap will have a drastic effect on our ability to not only maintain our representation programs in the six district we serve, but also to continue to provide the level of service Courts have come to expect from family court Guardians ad litem.

The CCPA, thankfully, is willing to work collaboratively with us to assist us in identifying any areas in which we can improve our efficiency. However, the bottom line is that these are high conflict families in which children are at significant risk. This is not an area in which we, as caring, dedicated professionals, are willing to skimp. The results could be disastrous. Just look at our history. The CLC was founded because a 6 year old girl was murdered by her father during a supervised visitation session. 10 years later, two of our clients – teenage girls, were murdered by their father. The need is great, the risks are high, and the work is immeasurable, in both financial savings to the State of Connecticut and in the safety and well-being of Connecticut's children.

Please, increase the funding for the CCPA, so that they can continue to train attorneys to do this work well and compensate us appropriately when we do.

Thank you for your attention.