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**Testimony of Jennifer C. Jaff, Esq.
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In Support of the Independence of the
Office of the Health Care Advocate**

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Good evening. We appreciate this opportunity to submit written testimony to the Appropriations Committee regarding the status of the Office of the Health Care Advocate.

Advocacy for Patients with Chronic Illness provides free information, advice and advocacy services to patients with chronic illnesses, including in the area of health insurance. Thus, we work closely with the Office of the Health Care Advocate (OHA), and urge you to maintain its independence.

OHA not only responds to thousands of individual consumers each year, but it is a leader in the health care community in our State. It has represented consumers at the only two health insurance premium rate increase hearings this State has ever held, ensuring that Anthem was not able to implement unreasonable rates this year. It has taken a leadership role in implementing federal mental health parity legislation and regulations. It has commented on behalf of Connecticut consumers on various health reform implementation, and has co-chaired the Sustinet Board, seeking to achieve universal health care in Connecticut. I have been on conference calls involving hundreds of health advocates nationwide in which OHA was featured as a model of consumer assistance, largely because of its independence.

I cannot comprehend any rationale for moving OHA to the Department of Consumer Protection. The OHA budget does not come from the general fund; it comes from the insurance fund. The OHA currently is housed in the Insurance Department for administrative purposes, but the OHA's ability to build relationships within the Insurance Department has been advantageous for Connecticut consumers. It is exactly where it belongs, where it makes sense.

But more importantly, it is critical that OHA maintain complete independence. OHA has been able to propose or support legislation and comment on other agencies' activities without obtaining prior approval or fearing retribution. It has served as a health care watchdog in our State, and in this role, it has championed the rights of consumers, saving them millions of dollars and ensuring their access to health care.

All one needs to do in order to assure oneself that OHA must remain independent is to look at all it has done. Please do not tie OHA's hands. Please retain its independence. Thank you.