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## Testimony of Shirley Bergert<sup>1</sup> Before the General Law Committee Regarding House Bill #6389

### An Act Transferring the Responsibilities of the Division of Special Revenue, Consumer Counsel, Healthcare Advocate and Board of Accountancy to the Department of Consumer Protection

March 8, 2011

Connecticut Legal Services serves low income households in Connecticut. These households rely on both the efforts of the Office of Healthcare Advocate (OHA) to ensure insurance companies treat them fairly and health care policy makers are aware of their concerns, and the Office of Consumer Counsel (OCC) to ensure utility rates are affordable and utility companies treat them fairly.

Both OHA and OCC have independent funding sources and highly specialized knowledge. Consolidating OHA and OCC in a larger agency merely adds another layer of bureaucracy with the potential for political interference threatening their ability to function independently on behalf of consumer interests.

### Recommended action: Ensure the independence of the Office of Health Care Advocate and the Office of Consumer Counsel

**Office of Health Care Advocate:** Legal services strongly supports maintaining the independence of OHA to ensure it can continue its important work providing assistance to consumers in the changing health care environment. OHA's independence and agility responding to policy developments and individual need will be compromised unless housing it in an agency is *limited to administrative purposes*. To provide a sense of the importance of maintaining independence and agility:

- OHA has undertaken an invaluable role in the effort to preserve and expand health care access for state residents, analyzing federal health care reform proposals and taking a leadership role in development of Connecticut's SustiNet program. OHA's comprehensive understanding of health care coverage and policy developments has ensured that the complexities of Medicaid have been taken into account, protecting low income access to health care.

<sup>1</sup> Director of the Public Benefits Task Force of Connecticut Legal Services; member of the Energy Conservation Management Board, Low Income Energy Advisory Board, Fuel Oil Conservation Board, and the Advisory Board for the Institute for Sustainable Energy.



- With health care reform, low-income consumers will have a greater need for policy advocacy as well as individual help. OHA has been an independent and intelligent consumer voice on the Medicaid Care Management Oversight Council (formerly the Medicaid Managed Care Council). OHA has also represented many individuals in resolving health care access issues before various state agencies and with managed care organizations.

**Office of Consumer Counsel:** Legal services strongly supports maintaining the independence of OCC and maintaining its location near the DPUC, the forum in which they routinely represent consumer interests. OCC is funded by utility ratepayers and has a long history of independence and effectiveness. Like OHA, its independence will be compromised unless housing it in an agency is *limited to administrative purposes*. To provide a sense of the importance of maintaining OCC's independence:

- OCC represents utility ratepayers in all docketed matters handled by the DPUC, including the many dockets governing rates and interactions with consumers.
- OCC has taken on specialized responsibilities relating to contracting for and purchase of the generation portion of electric bills and has intimate familiarity with the regional controls of the electric generation market and the implications for electric rates in Connecticut.
- OCC participates in the Connecticut Energy Advisory Board, Energy Efficiency Board and the Low Income Energy Advisory Board as an independent voice for consumers.
- OCC provides independent analysis to the legislature on utility policy.