



**Testimony of Jennifer Hatch, Program Associate
Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG)**

**Before the Connecticut General Assembly
Committee on Government Administration & Elections
March 7, 2011**

**Testimony in opposition to
S.B. 1009, An Act Creating the Office of Government Accountability**

Senator Schlossberg, Representative Morin, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony with respect to S.B. 1009, AA Creating the Office of Government Accountability. Given the size and scope of Connecticut's budget challenges, we applaud Governor Malloy's efforts to balance the budget through a number of means, including shoring up the State's accounting practices and the consolidation of agencies and commissions. Connecticut's consumers pay a real price for waste in Government and this budget appears to be a strong step back towards responsible budgeting.

With that said, ConnPIRG has grave concerns about the independence of the watchdog agencies proposed for consolidation in the bill before the Committee today. At a time when the public needs to gain faith in government again, this proposal erodes trust and transparency in the name of savings.

Central to this concern is the oversight of the agencies proposed for consolidation in this bill. The insertion of a politically appointed chief of the watchdog groups, reporting directly to the Governor with the authority to allocate resources, is a conflict on its face. Given that the Governor is directly under the jurisdiction of each of these agencies, the current paradigm of independent citizen commissions dictating their work is central to protecting both the appearance and actual independence of these agencies.

These agencies are independent of the Governor and General Assembly's reach by necessity. The recent history is clear. Connecticut is working hard to shed the image of a state with rampant corruption problems. The independence of these agencies was challenged under prior administrations for reasons that many believe were politically motivated. Problems may not crop up in this administration or in any particular future administration, but when they do, the Governor's control of the agency that conducts the investigation, will always lead to questions about process and result.

A second concern is with the availability of real long term savings through this merger. The missions of the core watchdog agencies - The Office of State Ethics (OSE), the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC) and the Freedom of Information Commission (FOI) - are distinct and separate. In fact, given the confidential nature of much of the work of OSE and SEEC and the mission of FOI to ensure the openness of public records, these agencies may be said to have conflicting interests that work because of the tension. This would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in a single agency structure with a chief executive.

With this lack of overlap and need for highly educated and specialized staff, the opportunity for functional consolidation appears limited. While we are not expert on the inner workings of these agencies, we urge the Committee to look closely at preserving agency expertise in these key areas. It would be a disservice to the people of Connecticut to develop a "one size fits all" approach if it doesn't truly apply.

A third issue is our concern about the addition of the unfunded work of the State Contracting Board to the missions of the three small watchdog agencies. The size and scope of this auditing responsibility may overwhelm their ability to fulfill their critical functions in the area of ethics, elections and freedom of information. We believe that a merger with OPM, who sets the contracting standards for the state, may be a better fit.

Finally, we would like to associate ourselves with the comments of Common Cause of Connecticut, with regard to the Citizens Election Program changes proposed in Section 43 of the bill. We defer to their expertise in the analysis of the flow of funds necessary for this critical program, and in doing so, oppose these "permanent" cuts for the simple reason that they threaten the viability of the fund. We are strongly committed to its support and do not believe we can sacrifice the programs benefits in difficult budget times.

In closing, we do not believe these agencies should be exempt from attempts to save precious resources during these difficult fiscal times. We do believe, however, that the independence of these watchdog agencies, unpopular at times with government officials, must be preserved. We urge the Governor and General Assembly will look for other means to reach this goal.

On behalf of ConnPIRG's members, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and look forward to working with you on this and other issues throughout the legislative session. I'd be happy to answer any questions the Committee has today.

Founded by students at UConn in 1973, the Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG) now represents thousands of Connecticut consumers. Our mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.