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March 8, 2012 Testimony: RAISED BILL 5016 sections 74-82 re: the consolidation of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities and the Office of Protection and Advocacy

Good Day Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Committee,

I am Sheila Mulvey, a parent and a member of the Advisory Board for the OPA and a member of the Council on Developmental Services. I rise in opposition to the consolidation of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities and the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

OPA is an agency that I have been very familiar with over the past 30 years as a professional in the field of developmental disabilities, as volunteer and advocate, and, mostly importantly, as a parent.

I strongly believe that OPA is the stanchion for which CT residents with disabilities can rely on for steady and consistent protections in cases of abuse and neglect, also in cases of lack of accessibility to that which the broader community enjoys, and in removing barriers to equal rights and freedoms.

OPA should remain as an independent authority within the government so that their power is not diminished and they can design and implement their own priorities to further protect those who need them.

I strongly urge you to consider the risk that will be placed upon people if this agency no longer will be able to maintain its independence, authority and power. This request is not about a "feel good" piece of legislation. This is about staving off the inhumanities that occur around us. The New York Times' recent investigative report of horrendous abuses of people with DD who receive services from the State is a tragic result of ineffective safeguards including their P&A system. According to the Times the federal government found that the P&A had lost their independence and administrative controls. CT has a solid and respected system in place and we cannot afford to take a chance and see what would happen with people's lives if we weaken it. On the contrary, we should be strengthening OPA especially during these tough times when so many changes are taking place that affect the stability in the lives of residents with disabilities.

Please do not allow the OPAs' power of protection to be diminished as it is proposed through this bill. My family relies on the very existence of this agency that helps us to face the daily challenges and barriers and many sleepless nights. That's why I am here today and I know that my feelings are shared by every family and consumer that I have ever met over all these years. I chose to serve on the OPA advisory board to help the agency and there have been many meetings when I wanted to run from the room as we listened to the horror of some abuse and neglect cases. I commend everyone who works there and deals with these situations on a daily basis. I commend them for embracing persons with disabilities as they go with them through their toughest times.

Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this critical matter:

Respectfully,

Sheila S. Mulvey.