Re: House Bill 5016

February 16, 2012

Dear Chairpersons, Senators Harp and Prague, and members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Robyn Trowbridge and I live in Meriden. I serve as one of the Co-Chairs of the Connecticut Family Support Council. I am here on behalf of the Council because we grow increasing more concerned with the proposed changes within Connecticut, specific to those living with disabilities.

We at the Connecticut Family Support Council have a statutory responsibility to identify and speak to the circumstances that affect children with disabilities and special health care needs and their families. I am speaking tonight in opposition to House Bill 5016 (Sections 75-82) which proposes a consolidation of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities and the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

I want to start by saying that yesterday, I was up here and got a little lost in Hartford and I said to myself…just keep going toward the Gold…meaning the Capital…this place that holds symbol as something important to us, it represents something we value and also is recognition that something critically important goes on here. It costs us some money to support this and things like it, but we do it because it's important to stand for and by what we value.

When I think about the incredible journey that has been made, over decades by and for those living with disabilities, I feel a poignant and deep respect…a sense of arrival and accomplishment. At last a sense of having the inherent right to claim an identity that is based in competency, self respect and dignity; an identity that has been shaped and supported by years of efforts by OPA and the like. I can't personally imagine having had to work that hard to claim what is so basic and fundamental. Yet they have done it and Connecticut's community of persons with disabilities is claiming it with clarity and command. We have moved into a time of seeds of realization. A time when individuals claim their personal power and resources and as consumers, they create, select and direct the supports they have, to craft the life they want; just like you and I.

For those of us close to the cause and working within deep understanding of the issues, the idea of consolidating OPA and CHRO sets into motion an unthinkable erosion of identity for the disability community and represents a shift that we feel will compromise and weaken the opportunities for advancement for individuals and the larger cause. These agencies are not aligned in purpose or culture and to attempt to force them to be so strips individuals with disabilities of a focal agency who represents them and is not distracted by other competing matters or interests.

OPA stands and needs to continue to stand with an essential autonomy that is so vital for the disability community. Its culture and founding and operating principles live in a true understanding of the unique elements, needs and challenges faced within our State by persons with disabilities, and the efforts of OPA are steadfast and responsible for anticipating and responding to those needs and challenges progressively. It is paramount to the future that this agency remain independent and not be constricted and affected by shifting priorities or influences which impede their ability to be an independent voice for those with disabilities. They work to bring awareness and ensure quality service provision within other State agencies and private providers, to ensure integrity and safe and humane treatment, to build strength within systems and for individuals through tremendous advocacy efforts and they stand as the single most powerful devoted system and symbol for the protection of the interests of the disability community. A system and symbol that says it will never be again as it once was and we will work and watch, and respond and act to ensure it. They are the ultimate safeguard for persons with disabilities and they cannot do what they do, or more importantly, what is their charge to do, under the direction and control of another state entity.

We support the ever important work of the CHRO and recognize the need for civil and human right law enforcement. Although there may be slight cross over within the function, OPA is vast in its impact specific to those with disabilities. It is critical that OPA be free to determine what they litigate, advocate for and establish as their priorities. This is fundamental within what is known as disability advocacy principle.

At this time of economic challenge, workforce reductions, and unemployment, the vulnerability of persons with disabilities increases and there is a clear need to remain focal and vigilant within advocacy efforts and to not allow erosion through the blending of purpose and shifting of priorities. It is absolutely critical that OPA remains a free standing entity whose charge is protecting and forwarding the opportunities for persons with disabilities, and within doing so we safeguard what we value, adhere to fundamental advocacy principle and build on the natural momentum toward productive, successful lives for Connecticut citizens living with disabilities.

Not unlike when I was lost yesterday in Hartford and relied on the Capital to find my way, when people with disabilities need help and direction, they look for an office on 60B Weston Street known as the Office of Protection and Advocacy, because it is through there they know they will find their way.

We urge you to vote against the consolidation of the OPA and CHRO.

Robyn Trowbridge
Co-Chair
CTFSC

Meriden