



764-A Campbell Avenue
West Haven, CT 06516

Voice: 203-934-7077

Fax: 203-934-7078

TDD: 203-934-7079

www.centerfordisabilityrights-ct.org

Opposition to the Proposed Merger between OPA and OGA

March 8, 2012 - HB 5016

Testimony by Joe Cohan,

Intern & Individual w/ Disability

I am testifying in opposition to HB 5016, which proposes to merge the Office of Protection and Advocacy (OPA) with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO) or the Office of Government Accountability (OGA).

I am a 24 year old recent graduate of Southern Connecticut State University's Honors College. I am also a person with a disability; I was born with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and I've used a wheelchair every day since I was 12. Since the Summer of 2010, I have been an intern at the Center for Disability Rights - one of five Centers for Independent Living in Connecticut. My testimony comes from personal experience and as an advocate for people with disabilities.

HB 5016 would be a significant setback to Connecticut's disability advocacy community and wouldn't provide any benefit to our state. There are four reasons for this:

1. If the merger were to occur with either CHRO or OGA, a legal conflict of interest would arise and OPA would be deprived of its authority to make independent decisions to best advocate for people with disabilities.
2. A merger with CHRO or OGA would create confusion regarding the mission, mandates, and purpose for both agencies. They are not the same.
3. Connecticut could risk losing federal funding of not just OPA but also the Council on Developmental Disabilities and UCONN's Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, totaling \$2.75 million. In effect, HB 5016 *costs Connecticut federal dollars*.
4. Eliminating the OPA deprives Connecticut citizens with disabilities access to a unique safeguard authority. The OPA has the authority to conduct investigations into abuse and neglect, access people in facilities, and to pursue legal and administrative remedies on behalf of people with disabilities. This is vitally important to people with disabilities.

I strongly oppose HB 5016 as it would not only cost Connecticut needed federal funding in a budget crunch, but it would take away a valuable resource from those with disabilities. Thank you for your time.

Joe Cohan, Intern
Center for Disability Rights