

Public Testimony Before the Joint Appropriations Committee
Regarding Proposed Merger of OPA and CHRO
Thursday, February 16, 2012

Senator Toni Harp and Representative Toni Walker, Co-Chairs:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you and the Committee members about the proposed merger of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (OPA) and the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO). I am Dr. Harvey Corson, President of the Connecticut Association of the Deaf (CAD).

This proposed consolidation would create a new Department of Human Rights, Protection, and Advocacy composed of these two former independent agencies: OPA and CHRO. These two major divisions have different roles and functions to be configured in this new structure.

Over the years, these two agencies have done commendable work in response to the concerns and on behalf of the Connecticut Community of Citizens with Disabilities and their Families. I wish to speak of the work of the OPA in dealing with the complaint and class action lawsuit brought forth by the Connecticut Association of the Deaf on behalf of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community against the Connecticut Hospitals in general. As the result of the involvement of OPA and the Federal Department of Justice, the CAD and the Connecticut Hospital Association were able to reach an agreement in August of 1998 in form of a Consent Decree signed by U.S. Magistrate Judge Thomas Smith whereby appropriate sign language interpreting services and auxiliary services in medical settings, especially with deaf and hard of hearing patients and their companions in hospitals and emergency rooms, are clearly outlined and required to be provided. This landmark agreement has served the Connecticut citizens well.

There are some concerns expressed in the Connecticut Disabled Community whereby this proposed merger will cause the following possible circumstances:

- 1) Loss of independent entity of advocacy and abuse & neglect investigations.
- 2) Possible loss of critical Federal P & A funds and funding for other disability programs.
- 3) Need to maintain public confidence, especially in the disability community in the integrity of both agencies: OPA and CHRO.

I believe that the Malloy Administration is sincere and honorable in making the proposed structural changes in bringing about the efficiency and good management of state government. We need to pause and review some of the proposed changes to strengthen the structure of the new entity by looking into the establishment of appropriate mechanism for 1) the input of the Connecticut Community of Citizens with Disabilities as part of the process for the appointment of Director of the OPA, 2) ensuring the independence of the OPA in making administrative decisions regarding to priorities, budgeting, investigations, and litigation, and 3) the advisory board consisting of citizens with disabilities to provide input.

Thank you.