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Good afternoon, Madam Co-Chair Harp, Madam Co-Chair Walker and members of the Appropriation Committee. First of all, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Kristie Nickens; I am a student of Advocacy Unlimited, an organization that train individuals in the community to become self advocates. This training has helped not only me but also my fellow classmates to understand the useful tools needed to help one another and our community.

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities has been an important component in providing these trainings, as part of the program empowering us to be better advocates for ourselves and our communities.

I oppose the merge because it jeopardizes Protection and Advocacy to make decisions in how to use its resources. The independence of OPA provides more credibility to our efforts, as we prepare to become self advocates, because the quality of training that is provided is of the highest standards available in the subject matter of self-advocacy.

We fear that we no longer will be able to get this training, which has made a major difference in my life, if OPA is merged with another agency that does not have the same mission and vision as OPA has for all persons with disabilities.

Please, please keep OPA independent! Thank you.