



Testimony of Cheri Quickmire

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Before the Appropriations Committee

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Regarding Governor's House Bill 6354

AAC the Governor's Budget Recommendations Regarding General Government

Common Cause is extremely disappointed that Governor Malloy in his budget proposal has further eviscerated the independence of the state's watchdog agencies, as well as their ability to do their job. This proposal consolidates the authority for governance, oversight and budgeting that was granted by the legislature with the Governor's appointee. In the future, oversight of key functions of the State Elections Enforcement Commission, the Office of State Ethics and the Freedom of Information Commission would reside with a political appointee of the Governor himself.

The Governor's proposal in HB 6353 eliminates the watchdog budgetary autonomy that was put in place by Public Act 04-204 – a response to the 2003 attempt by then-Governor Rowland to consolidate and control the watchdogs. This Act removed the budgetary control from the sole control of the Governor's office and placed it with the legislature to eliminate concerns that the Governor might exact retribution against one or more of the watchdogs for their actions or their respective boards and commissions. This is extremely problematic. Independent budgetary autonomy is critical for watchdog agencies.

In addition, the Governor's proposal in HB 5354 takes 10 specialized enforcement attorneys from five independent watchdogs and places them in a new Office of Hearings under the oversight of the Executive Administrator of the Office of Government Accountability (OGA) – a move that will erode the public's confidence in government, something we can ill afford at this time. Imagine if the Governor's appointee fires an ethics attorney for not meeting his deadlines. That becomes a potential scandal if the ethics attorney happened to be investigating a member of the

Governor's administration. I am sure you can imagine the accusations and headlines in newspapers across the state. Even though the attorney was fired reasons unrelated to her ethics' work, the firing by the Governor's appointee creates the appearance of political payback. Embedding those attorneys in an independent watchdog agency, with oversight from a citizens' commission protects the integrity of its watchdog functions and protects the Governor and Legislature from conjecture that an investigation or an action is politically motivated.

The proposal also removes five IT staff, three investigators from SEEC. This will make it virtually impossible for the agencies to supervise their professional staff and to ensure that the Citizens' Election Program and eCRIS system are able to function.

These moves will call into question whether or not the elections, ethics, and freedom of information laws are being administered and enforced fairly and in a non-partisan manner. Pooling the attorneys will create additional conflicts of interest as one agency may be investigating another agency.

The proposal is being presented as if there are significant savings. This is simply not true. The same minimal savings – projected \$187,000 - could be achieved by not filling vacant positions or simply having the agencies find the savings themselves.

Taking away independence takes away the oversight capacity of the watchdogs. It takes away resources and their ability to enforce. This is where we have been building confidence with the public. This proposal to dismantle the watchdogs will set us back many years.

The truth of the matter is that average citizens in the state do not know the significance of what the watchdogs do and accomplish. These agencies are charged with ensuring that elections are conducted in a fair and appropriate way; ensuring that citizens have access to government information and that state business is conducted in an ethical manner.

What citizens of Connecticut know is that this proposal smacks of a power grab.

And what citizens know, in addition, is that there are very good reasons for having strong, independent watchdog agencies. Former Gov. John G. Rowland was sentenced to a year in prison and four months of house arrest for selling his office in a corruption scandal and the state responded. The response to that graft was action at the General Assembly, with support from then-Governor Rell, to ensure that special interest money was taken out of the equation for election campaigns in the state. Connecticut has taken significant steps to create a landmark clean election program and State Elections Enforcement Commission, reorganized the office of State Ethics and Freedom of Information Commission that are committed to ensuring that our democratic society

fulfill the requirement that government officials are accountable to the people who elect them.

Last year, the Governor convinced the legislature to consolidate the three watchdog agencies into the Office of Government Accountability (OGA) under an appointed administrator. This was a mistake and the first step in eroding the independence of the agencies. The legislature, in response, made clear that the administrator was to supervise back-office functions of the OGA only and the administrator was to be under the supervision of the watchdogs, not the other way around. Putting the direct functioning of the watchdog agencies under a political appointee is an extremely bad idea. It undermines the good government protections afforded to Connecticut after years of scandal and is entirely unacceptable. We believe that the General Assembly must reaffirm their commitment to open government and the function of independent, good-government watchdogs. Now is the time.

