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Appropriations Committee
March 22, 2013
Testimony of Joelen J. Gates

H.B. 6354 ***AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING GENERAL GOVERNMENT***
Section 90 – Proposes to consolidate the legislative commission and eliminate the Commission on Aging

Recommended Action: Reject

My name is Joelen Gates and I am the managing attorney of the Willimantic office of Connecticut Legal Services, a private, non-profit law firm. I practice elder law and am also a member of the Long Term Care Advisory Council which provides assistance and support to the state Long Term Care Planning Committee.

I am here today to urge you to support and maintain funding for the Commission on Aging (CoA), an independent research and advocacy organization in the legislative branch. Section 90 of H.B. 6354 proposes to eliminate the CoA and consolidate five other commissions into a new agency called the Commission on Citizen Advocacy.

I realize these are difficult economic times and the governor and legislature must make tough decisions to reduce state expenditures. However, eliminating the CoA, at a time when the baby boomer population is aging and causing a rise in demand for long term care services, is not wise state planning. The state spends about $2.7 billion or 13% of the state budget for long-term care services and the amount is increasing every year as more baby boomers become eligible for and need long term care. Currently over a million people, about one-third of the Connecticut population, are baby boomers, elderly or people of all ages with disabilities who may need long term care services and supports now or in the future.

The CoA has been instrumental in formulating the state long term care plan that aims to shift the balance of state resources from expensive nursing home care to home and community based services for the elderly. State funding for more long term care support and services in community settings will save the state even more money as Connecticut's population ages and the demand for long term care grows. The CoA has also promoted needed long term care services for younger people with disabilities who are not served by the state Medicaid waivers for the elderly.

The CoA provides invaluable assistance to the legislature and aging community and is not duplicated by any other state agency or office. As an independent, non-partisan voice for older Connecticut residents, it provides reliable information based on unbiased research and state-wide surveys on the needs of Connecticut's population for long term care.

Over the past 12 years I have personally worked with Julie Evans Starr, the Executive Director of the CoA, who chairs and provides strong leadership for the Long Term Care Advisory Council (LTCAC). In addition to the LTCAC, Ms. Starr and the CoA staff have provided leadership and staff support for the Grandparents' Visitation Rights Task Force and the Aging in Place Task Force. Ms. Starr is the co-chair of the Money Follows the Person Steering Committee and chair of the Money Follows the Person Workforce Development Subcommittee. The CoA created, chairs and manages the CT Elder Action Network and the CoA is an active member of the Council on Medical Assistance Program Oversight.

The CoA gives the state a big bang for its buck. With only three staff members and a modest budget of $253,506, the CoA has enlisted the expertise and experience of 21 volunteers from around the state to help guide, inform, and provide needed assistance to the CoA in its mission. There is still much work to be done to improve the home and community based care that Connecticut citizens want and need as they get older or become disabled. Please do not eliminate the one state commission devoted to this mission.