

Testimony for Appropriations Committee RE: House Bills 6353 and 6354

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My name is Michael Rion. I served on the Citizen's Ethics Advisory Board (appointed by Governor Rell) from 2005 to 2008. In addition, my profession as an organizational ethics consultant informs my views.

I urge the Committee not to accept recommendations from the Governor's Office that impair the independence of the Office of State Ethics.

The OSE provides oversight and, when necessary, investigation and enforcement activities related to our state Code of Ethics. No one --legislator, elected public executive official or civil servant--likes to be challenged about his or her conduct. It is natural to assume our own integrity and, therefore, to think that administrative efficiencies that limit the independence of the OSE are acceptable.

But it is precisely because we --all of us as human beings-- can make mistakes that we must have a fiercely independent agency to ensure that possible misconduct is challenged. Yes there will be intentional wrongdoing and that is enough to argue for independence, lest a future Governor misuse his/her power over an investigation by the OSE. But even well intentioned people, among whom I certainly include Governor Malloy, can be subject to moral blinders, to unintended rationalizations and unexamined assumptions that may lead to ethical questions. Only if the OSE 's independence is strongly protected can it provide the "emperor has no clothes" challenge that is sometimes needed.

In addition, independence of the Office is essential to the public trust that provides the basis for our expectations of ethics in public life. When an agency like the OSE is in any way overseen by the administration or a legislative committee whom the Office regulates, many people will come to doubt the integrity of its work. When that happens, it is not the OSE that is harmed but the very legitimacy of our democratic framework.

Thank you for your consideration.