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## Testimony before the Appropriations Committee Opposing HBs 6353 and 6354

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Submitted by Liz Dupont-Diehl, Policy Director, Connecticut Association for Human Services  
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Good afternoon, Senator Harp and Representative Walker, and members of the committee. My name is Liz Dupont-Diehl and I am the Policy Director for the Connecticut Association for Human Services. CAHS seeks to end poverty and empower all families to build a secure economic future. CAHS produces research and analysis on child poverty and other issues as needed to drive advocacy, and we work to create fair opportunity for economic success for all families. CAHS also operates a number of programs to help people become self-sufficient, such as the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, financial literacy classes and helping people connect with eligible benefits to help them access health care, meet basic needs and become self-sufficient.

CAHS is a member of the newly-formed group Connecticut Advocates for Accountable Government, which was born of members all experiencing difficulty in collecting data from our public institutions, and from a steady erosion of the public's access to information about the government we elect and fund and the work government accomplishes on our behalf. Coalition members wish to work to fight efforts to reduce government transparency and accountability, and promote initiatives to make Connecticut one of the most open governments in the country..

We are in opposition to HB 6353 and 6354 would have the effect of severely inhibiting the independence and effectiveness of the independent "watchdog" agencies. It is critical not only to advocates such as ourselves, but to researchers, you lawmakers and to all citizens that our state retain a vigorous and independent Freedom of Information Commission. The FOIA has a critical role in protecting the right of citizens of know about the workings of their government.

Think about the business that's conducted that is protected under FOI. Public meetings, at which important decisions are made and at which citizens have the opportunity to offer input. Government work accomplishing the public's business; law enforcement, which has power over all citizens, as they live in their homes or drive on public roads; the purchase and construction of public services; the administration of justice... Each of these systems can be awesome in its power and needs to have fair and open rules to ensure violations are addressed and don't become cultural, and can be discovered if they do. Without a robust and functioning Freedom of Information law and commission, these systems can simply slide into non-compliance and the citizens who pay for them and are bound by them have no way of discovering if they are run with integrity and in compliance with the law.

CAHS and many of our coalition partners use data and research to drive advocacy. When we can't get this information, we are all the poorer, and quite frankly we are collectively at far greater risk like the government corruption which has sent a Connecticut Governor and some mayors to jail for abusing their public trust.

In this, the Coalition is like the press, realizing that people need complete and timely information to make informed and accurate decisions about their world, their community and the policy decisions they face. This is ever more important as the number of working journalists dwindles and Connecticut's cherished system of "Town Hall" and public meetings becomes rarer, with fewer opportunities for citizens to get together, take part in the same activities, and build a common understanding of how their government and communities work and how they should work.

Connecticut's FOI law and commission offer every citizen a simple and clear process through which to challenge abuse of power and gain the public documents and records to which they have a right. This system benefits everyone in our state, whether they use the system or not. It is essential we preserve them.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony .

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