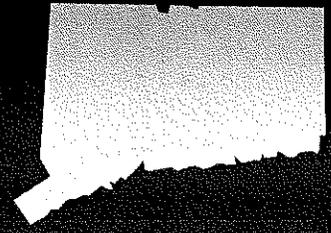


# FISCAL POLICY CENTER

At Connecticut Voices for Children



## Testimony Regarding House Bills 6353 and 6354

Appropriations Committee

Wade Gibson, J.D.

Senior Policy Fellow

March 22, 2013

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, members of the Committee:

My name is Wade Gibson. I am a Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. I am here today representing Voices as a member of a newly formed coalition, Connecticut Advocates for Accountable Government, that also includes the ACLU, Common Cause, Connecticut Citizen Action Group, League of Women Voters, New Haven Legal Assistance, and Connecticut Association for Human Services.

We oppose sections of House Bills 6353 and 6354 that would seriously reduce both the funding and independence of the Freedom of Information Commission, Office of State Ethics, State Elections Enforcement Commission, and other watchdog agencies like the Office of the Child Advocate. **The Governor's proposals would jeopardize Voices' ability to conduct independent research in the best interest of Connecticut's children, and also diminish protections for some of Connecticut's most vulnerable populations, as well as the public at large.**

Connecticut Voices depends on watchdog agencies like the FOI Commission to ensure access to the information we use to hold accountable state agencies that serve Connecticut's children and families. We have strong working relationships with the Departments of Education, Children and Families, and others and usually do not need FOI requests to obtain public information. The fact that we *could* force disclosure under the FOI statute, however, makes these friendly, non-litigious relationships more productive. Moreover, when we do have to resort to FOI requests, it is often in situations where the information at issue is of most value to the public. **The proposed changes would rob the FOI Commission of much of its influence and thus threaten Voices' ability to gather information, inform legislators, and hold state agencies accountable to the public.**

Similarly, the Governor's proposed changes would jeopardize the Office of the Child Advocate's ability to speak out on behalf of thousands of vulnerable children for whom there are few other places to turn. In cases of foster parent abuse or neglect, for instance, foster children have few other resources. The proposed changes would seriously erode the autonomy of the Office of the Child Advocate, giving the Governor's Administration—the same party investigated by the Child Advocate—authority to set the Advocate's budget.

**The amount saved by these proposed changes is comparatively tiny: they amount to less than 0.013% of the state's budget deficit.** The changes' primary effect, therefore, would be to reduce transparency and accountability far more than the deficit. Connecticut has earned, over many years, the reputation as a clean and transparent government. Today is not the time to reverse that progress.