



CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES

A PRIVATE NONPROFIT CORPORATION

872 MAIN STREET P.O. BOX 258 WILLIMANTIC, CT 06226-258

TELEPHONE (860) 456-1761 OR 1-800-413-7796 (CLIENT TOLL-FREE LINE)

FAX (860) 456-7420

E-MAIL WILLIMANTIC@CONNLEGLSERVICES.ORG

ANNE LOUISE BLANCHARD
LITIGATION DIRECTOR

CLS ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
62 WASHINGTON STREET
MIDDLETOWN, CT 06457
(860) 344-0447

STEVE EPPLER-EPSTEIN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

LAW OFFICES

211 STATE STREET
BRIDGEPORT, CT 06604

587 MAIN STREET
NEW BRITAIN, CT 06051

153 WILLIAMS STREET
NEW LONDON, CT 06320

20 SUMMER STREET
STAMFORD, CT 06901

85 CENTRAL AVENUE
WATERBURY, CT 06702

872 MAIN STREET
WILLIMANTIC, CT 06226

SATELLITE OFFICES (CALL FOR OFFICE HOURS)

5 COLONY STREET
MERIDEN, CT 06451

62 WASHINGTON STREET
MIDDLETOWN, CT 06457

98 SOUTH MAIN STREET
SOUTH NORWALK, CT 06854

564 PROSPECT STREET
TORRINGTON, CT 06790

155 WEST MAIN STREET
ROCKVILLE, CT 06066

TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC., REGARDING THE PROVISIONS OF H.B. 6353 (An Act Concerning State Budget Reform) REGARDING THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

Co-Chairs Senator Harp and Representative Walker, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee: I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Connecticut Legal Services Inc. (CLS), a private nonprofit law firm providing free legal services to low-income clients in civil matters since 1977.

Over the last 30 years, CLS has represented hundreds of thousands of low-income families in cases involving children's legal issues. These issues range from an individual child's medical, educational, and juvenile justice issues, to systemic advocacy with the Departments of Children and Families, Social Services, Developmental Services, and Mental Health and Addiction Services. Throughout CLS' long history of children's advocacy, we have often referred callers to OCA--either because the callers are from social service agencies with concerns about a child, from families who no longer have custody of their children but who raise legitimate issues about the welfare of their child, or worse, from families asking for an investigation regarding the death of their child who was in state care. This is the critical role filled by the Office of the Child Advocate--an independent agency which has represented children directly, has been a tireless voice of children's advocacy on legislative issues, and had conducted thorough child fatality reviews with detailed recommendations to address systemic failures.

CLS has had the privilege of working with the OCA while representing children both individually and in systemic litigation. We have found that the OCA at all times places the interests of Connecticut's children above any political agenda. In doing the job the OCA was created to do, the agency has not bowed to political expediency but rather examined each issue before it with objectivity -- the exact purpose meant in the creation of the Office of the Child Advocate.

The Office of the Child Advocate recognizes the difficult fiscal choices this legislature is facing yet needs to maintain its ability to fulfill its statutory mandate as an independent watchdog agency. Consequently, the OCA supports the Office of Government Accountability (OGA) proposal to restructure the OGA in a manner which both would preserve OCA's independence and provide significant cost-savings to the state. CLS supports OCA's request. This agency is doing its job and doing it well- and in the long run, this is the best way to protect the scarce resources remaining in Connecticut--both fiscal and human.

Anne Louise Blanchard
Litigation Director, Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.

