

Senate Bill 434

An Act Concerning the Department of Administrative Services and E-Government,
Extensions of Existing Contracts, A State Americans with Disabilities Act
Coordinator Advisory Committee and Settlements by the Claims Commissioner

Government Administration & Elections Committee
January 28, 2013

Good afternoon, and thank you Honorable Members of the Government Administrations and Elections Committee. My name is J. Paul Vance, Jr. and I have had the honor of serving for the past seventeen months as the state's Claims Commissioner.

I am here today to testify on, and ask your support for, the sections of Senate Bill 434 that relate to Claims Commissioner operations.

For those of you who are not familiar, my position as Claims Commissioner is similar to an 'internal affairs' judge for the State of Connecticut. Since the State of Connecticut cannot be sued without its consent, by statute the Claims Commissioner has the authority to determine if a claim against the State has merit. We have hundreds of claims that are brought against the State that are different and range from a slip and fall claim in a judicial building to lost property at a state university to an assault in a correctional facility. Many different state agencies have been the 'defendant' so to speak and it is important that I maintain both independence and a sense of fairness to serve as what has been called 'the conscious of the State.' I take this role very seriously and I weigh each claim carefully to ensure that that the resident has been treated fairly and determine if the State has acted appropriately or not.

While I have great responsibility in the position, the authority is guided by C.G.S. Section 4-158, which allows me to: (1) order that a claim be denied or dismissed; (2) order immediate payment for the claim up to \$7,500; (3) recommend to the General Assembly payment of a just claim in an amount exceeding \$7,500; or (4) authorize a claimant to sue the State. Senate Bill 434 raises the thresholds in the statute from \$7,500 to \$20,000, and therefore would allow the Claims Commissioner to expeditiously resolve more cases.

The statutes that set forth the jurisdictional limits of the Claims Commissioner have not been updated in almost twenty years, and I submit that the proposal to increase these limits will save the State resources. By raising the threshold, the claimants and

respondents that appear before me have a bit more room to settle just claims without being compelled to clog the agenda of the GA or clog the docket of the judicial department with lawsuits that have a value of less than \$20,000. Not only will this change help my office be more efficient in attempting to settle valid claims, but it will lessen the strain on the attorneys in the Office of the Attorney General who litigate these claims, giving them greater ability to negotiate settlements and enabling them to avoid going to court.

In my confirmation hearing for this position, I spoke about my desire to make the Office of the Claims Commissioner more efficient, and I believe this is one such step in the right direction.

I thank you for your time, and the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have now, or at any time, about this proposal or the work that my office performs.