

February 26, 2013

To: Labor and Public Employees Committee
RE: H.B. 6417 An Act Concerning Probate Court Employees

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Tercyak, members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee.

I am Judge Beverly Streit-Kefalas, probate judge of the Milford-Orange Probate District and President of the Connecticut Assembly of Probate Judges. I have been an elected judge of probate since November 1998 and have been re-elected as judge each term since that time.

I am presently serving as the President of the Probate Assembly of 54 probate judges elected across the state of Connecticut. My testimony today is made on behalf of the Assembly who opposes H.B. No. 6417, An Act Concerning Probate Employees.

The Assembly is opposed to the bill for one central reason – a reason that goes to the heart of the employment relationship between elected officials and their staff.

Probate judges are elected to serve the public. Our staff plays an integral role in ensuring that our constituents' needs are met. And not only that our constituents' needs are met but that they are met appropriately, with courtesy and respect and in a manner that engenders confidence in the office of the elected official.

I am fortunate to have five employees in the Milford-Orange Probate Court who I hired and I supervise. I am even more fortunate that they not only excel in their knowledge of the probate system but that they each genuinely care for the men, women and children who walk through the probate court doors with life changing and often traumatic situations. They are, as we often say in the probate system, our frontline. They are in many ways, the "face" of the probate court and not only do they represent what is great about our system but they also engender the public's trust in the work I do as an elected official. Their responsiveness to problems equates to my responsiveness as an elected judge. Negative or positive, their attention to the public has a direct impact not only on the purpose of our system but also to the electability of the judge of that court.

I trust that each of you has a legislative aide in whom you have the utmost confidence in answering constituent questions and concerns and that you each rely on your aides to ensure that you are at all times aware of the issues important to your constituents. Probate judges also depend on such confidence, trustworthiness and reliability in our staff.

The bill before you allowing for the collective bargaining of probate court employees would effectively reverse a longstanding public policy both in our probate court system but also on a local, state and national level that supports an at-will employment relationship between an elected official and his or her staff.

Our staff is our frontline. Their value to each of us, the judge, the public, you and me, is priceless.

We have all sacrificed in the probate system in the past 2 years to work toward an improved system, one that continues to serve the public the way it deserves and in an economically efficient manner. On January 5, 2011, over fifty percent of the probate courts were consolidated and the equivalent of elected judges effectively lost their jobs. I am proud to say that of the 350 probate court employees at the time of consolidation that not one of them was laid off or lost her or his job. And even in the face of zero layoffs of court employees, the consolidation of the courts in 2011 has resulted in a system wide savings of over \$3.7 million on an annual basis.

The court employees have, as have many employees across the state and in particular, state employees, had their wage increases frozen for a period of time. But prior to the 2011 consolidation, there was no uniformity in wages and benefits amongst the 117 probate courts and its employees. As a result of the consolidation law, Public Act 09-114 included the adoption of a system-wide compensation and benefits plan. Uniform pay and benefits have been implemented for the first time in the centuries old probate system. In July of this year as a result of an internal pay equity study, pay equity increases will be given. And merit reviews and cost of living wage adjustments will be implemented for the first time in our court system on an across the board basis.

These are challenging economic times – an understatement if there ever was one. Nothing would please me more than to offer and be able to fund salary increases to my staff. As legislators facing one of the worst budget deficits in our state history, you know full well that what your heart may want to do can be far different from the reality of the financial bottom line.

The probate assembly concurs with the testimony of Judge Paul Knierim, probate court administrator. And on behalf of the 54 elected probate judges in the state, I respectfully request that the committee recognize the value of the longstanding employment relationship between elected officials and their staff and therefore reject passage of HB 6417.