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***TESTIMONY OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL GEORGE JEPSEN
BEFORE THE JUDICIARY LAW COMMITTEE
MARCH 10, 2012***

Good morning Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 31, An Act Concerning Continued Delivery of Legal Services to the Poor. This bill seeks to address the costs of providing supportive legal services to the poor by increasing funding for the Connecticut Bar Foundation and decreasing funding provided to the Judicial Branch's Data Processing Revolving Fund.

Currently, legal services for the poor are funded through Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA), general fund appropriations and court fees. These services were initially funded solely through IOLTA, but this source has dramatically collapsed. IOLTA has seen a damaging drop in funding from roughly \$20 million in legal aid to just over \$2 million in the last several years.

IOLTA was the sole source of funding for Legal Aid until the national credit crisis caused a significant reduction in funds. In 2009, facing a need to develop multiple funding sources, the Legislature, Governor and Judicial Branch created legislation that provided additional funding for Legal Aid through increases on court filing fees. However, legislation in 2012, which allocated seventy percent of collected court fees to Legal Aid funding, included a sunset provision that will bring an end to that portion of funding on July 1, 2015. This bill eliminates the sunset provision and continues to fund services that hundreds of thousands of poor people in Connecticut depend upon.

Legal Aid is a critical service for thousands of Connecticut's poor. Providing a wide array of services that go beyond the court room, Legal Aid has worked to keep our children in school, protect women safe from abuse in their family relationships, save many from homelessness and assist families with obtaining basic healthcare. These issues are some of the most challenging facing Connecticut's residents. Without the help provided by Legal Aid, many would be alone in the fight. Legal Aid plays a role in protecting our most vulnerable seniors from abuse and exploitation. Connecticut's workers have been able to obtain employment, fair wages and safe working conditions in part through Legal Aid's dedicated lawyers.

There are instances when constituents come to us facing issues over which I do not have jurisdiction, or seeking representation that I cannot legally provide. Often, the only place they

can turn is Legal Aid. Despite serious funding challenges, Legal Aid still helps eighty-five percent of individuals seeking their assistance in eviction cases and seventy-five percent in family cases. Legal Aid's ability to do that work is in jeopardy without continuing this important funding source.

I encourage members of this committee to act favorably on Senate Bill 31 and support the Governor's proposal to address the need to fund Legal Aid for the thousands of Connecticut residents that depend upon it year after year.