



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

**Testimony of Attorney Sue Garten
In Support of H.B. 5063, AAC Disclosure of Pardon Applications, and
Substituted Language for H.B. 5065, AAC Unemployment Compensation**

I am an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid. I am here on behalf of Connecticut's legal services programs to testify in support of HB 5063, which keeps the content of pardons applications confidential except for disclosure to the state's attorneys upon their request. I am also submitting substitute language for HB 5065, AAC Unemployment Compensation.

Our programs provide free legal services to low income residents throughout the state of Connecticut. We represent persons with criminal convictions in a variety of civil matters, including pardons applications. Most of our clients seek a pardon for employment purposes, others want to rent housing in safe neighborhoods.

The Board of Pardons and Paroles has created a rigorous application process for eligible individuals who have demonstrated great efforts to rehabilitate themselves. Confidentiality is critical to the pardons process. The Board encourages applicants to be forthcoming in giving details about their efforts to rehabilitate. That may include information about substance abuse recovery, mental health treatment, domestic violence, and other sensitive personal information.

The proposed bill and the Board's current practices strike an appropriate balance between an applicant's privacy rights and the public interest. The bill would exempt the content of pardons applications from FOIA disclosure requirements. But the bill explicitly provides that state's attorneys may have access to the applications. The state's attorneys may appear at hearings to support or oppose an application. The Board already notifies crime victims that an application has been filed, and victims have the ability to oppose an application. The Board's hearings are held in state courtrooms and are open to the public.

We urge the adoption of HB 5063, which allows rehabilitated ex-offenders an opportunity to provide for themselves and their families, significantly decreasing the chances of recidivism.

We also support the concept of HB 5065, a study of the unemployment compensation system.

Connecticut's unemployment insurance trust fund has been insolvent since 2009. We have had to borrow money from the federal government to pay benefits, and we have also had to pay millions of dollars in interest on those borrowed funds. Only a change in the funding formula will prevent this from happening again in the next economic downturn. Two years ago, the legislature changed one part of the funding formula. (Public Act 12-46 introduced the concept of "average high cost multiple" and gradually increased it to 1.0, meaning that the trust fund should have a balance equal to a full year's benefit payout.) The remaining, critical change is to increase the taxable wage base, which has been \$15,000 for 11 years. I have attached proposed substitute language for H.B 5065 to my testimony to effect this change.

Finally, legal services strongly supports SB 57, which protects the first \$1000 of direct deposited wages from execution.

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