

Heather Kennedy, LMFT
Probate Court Officer
New London Regional Children's Probate Court

Written Testimony in support of: HB 5066: An Act Concerning Certain Workers' Rights to Collectively Bargain, as introduced by the Labor and Public Employees Committee
February 18, 2014

Thank you for raising legislation that will provide us probate court employees with the right to collectively bargain. This change in statute is long overdue.

I have served as a Probate Court Officer in the New London Regional Children's Probate Court for 7.5 years. It is my job to work on behalf of some of our state's most vulnerable, often neglected and abused children. When children have parents who are unwilling or unable to care for them, their relatives turn to the probate courts to avoid foster care placements. I work closely with the families, attorneys, DCF and Judges involved in these complex matters. In my time here, I've seen a lot in the way probate administration treats their employees.

Probate Administration talks about how the judges have power to run their courts, but that is simply not true anymore with respect to their employees. Last year, following an expensive pay equity study, Probate Administration decided to "save" funds by denying workers like myself a merit increase even though we earned it. Remember, this is a merit raise – one that is given out to incentivize performance. When my administrative judge complained to Probate Administration that I am a hard working employee who met all of the standards for a merit increase, he was told he was not allowed to give it due to a change in pay structure after the consolidation. Further, in January, I was also denied a Cost of Living increase that most state employees and most probate employees received. To date, my last pay increase was given in 2008.

In other words, Probate Administration prefers to have it both ways: they are the unilateral decider of all conditions of employment and yet they claim that the judges are in total control of their courts. The effect is that some of us workers get the worst of both worlds. We are "at will" employees, who must work for whatever wages and benefits are set by administrators in West Hartford, not our Judges. I was lucky to have an Administrative Judge who stuck up for me, but even then that did not change the result as the rule was set without consideration of our input.

Providing probate court employees the right to form a union would fix this broken system. It would give us a voice. I urge you to support this bill. Thank you very much for your consideration.