



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF STATE ETHICS

TESTIMONY PRESENTED BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

March 10, 2014

**Statement of Carol Carson, Executive Director
Office of State Ethics**

H.B. No. 5481 – An Act Establishing the Central Office of Administrative Hearings

Good Afternoon, Senator Musto, Representative Jutila, Senator McLachlan, Representative Hwang, and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Carol Carson, and I am the Executive Director of Office of State Ethics. I'm here to testify on **House Bill 5481, An Act Establishing the Central Office of Administrative Hearings**, which proposes to establish an office within the Office of Governmental Accountability to hear contested cases from many different state agencies, including the three independent watchdog agencies, the Office of State Ethics, the Freedom of Information Commission, and the State Elections Enforcement Commission.

The Office of State Ethics **strongly opposes House Bill 5481**. Although we do not object to the establishment of a central office of administrative hearings within state government, the Office of State Ethics and the other independent watchdog agencies should not be part of that central office for the following principal reasons.

First, the bill would remove our independence. The central office of administrative hearings would be headed by a Chief Administrative Law Judge who is nominated and may be removed by the Governor. By placing contested matters of the Office of State Ethics under the oversight of someone who answers to the Governor only, creates an environment where the independence and non-partisanship of ethics matters will always be questioned.

Second, it strips the Office of State Ethics of necessary staff and resources. Section 4 would transfer Office of State Ethics employees who have responsibilities related to hearings, to the central office of administrative hearings. The end result would be the loss of essential staff, grinding to a halt the operations of the Office of State Ethics and the Citizen's Ethics Advisory Board. The consequences of this bill would lead to situations where individuals who are subject to the Codes of Ethics no longer receive timely, non-partisan advice or disposition of contested matters. The end result will be inefficiency, backlogs and delays.

In 2011, when the Office of State Ethics was incorporated into the Office of Governmental Accountability, the goal was to save money. This proposal would negate those savings by a significant factor without gaining any efficiency.

Finally, it would also reduce the ability of the Office of State Ethics to fairly, efficiently and effectively administer and enforce the Codes of Ethics for Public Officials, State Employees and Lobbyists. Shifting ethics hearings into the proposed central office of administrative hearings, along with hearings involving the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Transportation, and the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, each of which requires specialized knowledge and processes, just doesn't make sense. It will further weaken the trust of Connecticut's citizens in the integrity of state government.

I ask you not to undermine the operations and accomplishments of the Office of State Ethics and the Citizen's Ethics Advisory Board but maintain their independence, resources and enforcement authority.

Thank you for your consideration.