

**Testimony before the Joint Committee on Appropriations regarding the Governor's
Budget Proposal for the FY 2016 – FY 2017 Biennium
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Good Morning. My name is Colleen Murphy and I am the Executive Director and General Counsel of the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC or Commission). Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Governor's Proposed Budget for the 2016 and 2017 Biennium. My remarks will be brief.

By way of background, the FOIC is a small independent body with only one program – to administer and enforce the provisions of Connecticut's Freedom of Information Act. But, its mission is large – to ensure that citizens of Connecticut have the most transparent and accountable government to which they are entitled and permitted by law. The FOIC is an entity that has a reputation for excellence throughout the world. It now has a nine member Commission that meets to hear individual access disputes and then twice a month to formally rule on those disputes. It is responsible for the adjudication of more than 900 formal citizen complaints a year. The Commission also makes mediation a focal point of its work and resolves on average approximately 65% of its caseload through mediation and complaint review. Further, its attorneys represent the Commission at all levels of court, on appeals of Commission decisions (approximately 20 court appeals per year).

Education is a significant component of the FOIC's mission and to that end, FOIC staff conduct over one hundred speaking engagements each year. These engagements are held to educate the public and public officials alike. The FOIC also has two educational outreach programs – one for Spanish speaking individuals and one for middle school and high school aged youths. The FOIC staff handles thousands of telephone and in-person inquiries each year. Staff is also responsible for maintenance and production of a highly fluid web site, which provides visitors to it with the most up-to-date information on hearings, meetings, Commission and court decisions, upcoming speaking engagements and frequently asked questions.

The Commission has undergone numerous cutbacks in recent years, including a reduction in staff from its highest of 23 in 2011 (when the FOIC was consolidated into the Office of Governmental Accountability) to its lowest today of 15. The Commission has separately provided a copy of its current organizational chart and salary information. Further, the FOIC has participated in voluntary reduction of its allotments each time it has been asked to do so during the past several years, most recently in October (1%) and December (1%) of the past year; it also submitted a reduction option for the upcoming biennium in the amount of \$5,000 (which has been included directly in the Governor's proposed budget).

The FOIC is struggling to be sure. It could serve its citizens much better if it were provided with sufficient staff and resources, so that freedom of information disputes could be heard and decided faster and more efficiently. The FOIC is painfully aware of the reality that access delayed is access denied. But, the FOIC believes that it must continue to be part of the solution to the fiscal burdens that face our state and pledges to continue trying to do more with less.

The Commission's review of the Governor's proposed budget for the next biennium reveals that no significant additional budgetary cuts have been called for nor has there been a call for further consolidation. In a word, the FOIC is relieved. However, the FOIC is concerned that the Governor's budget seeks to carry forward the voluntary allotment reductions from this past year, an amount totaling an additional \$16,570 in FY16 and \$33,140.00 in FY17. The FOIC will ask the subcommittee to consider that reduction carefully when it reviews the Commission's budget in more detail, as it may seriously curtail the Commission's ability to proceed with its educational and outreach component, including certain aspects which have been put on hold for the past several years.

The FOIC looks forward to discussing this and other matters related to its budget submission in greater detail with the subcommittee in the very near future. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.