

Testimony of Attorney Alice A. Bruno  
In Support of Raised Bill No. 1051 -- March 9, 2015

Good afternoon. My name is Alice Bruno. I grew up in Connecticut, and I have practiced law here since 1981, but this is the first time that I have ever appeared before this Legislature to testify.

I practiced law in New Haven from 1981 until 2005, when I joined the Office of Probate Court Administrator (OPCA) as a Staff Attorney. From there I went on to serve as the Deputy Chief Clerk of the New Haven Superior Court, Executive Director of the Connecticut Bar Association and most recently, during this past election season, as Special Counsel in the Office of the Secretary of the State.

I would like to speak to my first hand experiences while working for the Secretary of the State, and my reflections on the changes that this legislature made to the Probate Court system, so controversial at the time. As those of you in the Legislature at that time will recall, that was a pivotal time in the history of the probate court system.

Legislation had been passed to create the Regional Children's Probate Courts. The far more sweeping, and controversial, legislation was yet to come. And, it did come; although painful and difficult for many to get there. Connecticut lawmakers endorsed the consolidation of over 120 odd probate courts operating at profoundly varied degrees of professionalism into one with standardized systems, required hours of operation, etc. It was hard to do this; it had an impact on many people: on long time staff made redundant, on non- attorney judges phased out; the fewer individuals to be elected probate judges from either party in the reduced number of courts; etc.

Concerns similar to these will no doubt be the concerns of many people in the towns and cities of our state, and especially in the Registrars Offices, as they consider the impact of 1051. Those are not the concerns that should be determinative to this body, whose sole concern is and must be "what is best for the people of Connecticut"? That of course would be to have an electorate served by the professional staff the legislation provides for. This legislation was drafted with the expertise of the SOTS staff trained in elections law, a staff which has worked very closely with Connecticut's Registrars over many, many, election cycles.

When I worked as Special Counsel to the Secretary of State this past fall I had the opportunity to visit with many Registrars throughout the state to assess their preparedness for election-day registration, among other matters. When I met with them, I was, quite frankly, surprised by both the very wide variation among them of their backgrounds, the amount of time they spent working in their capacity as Registrar, their apparent skill sets, and the eagerness with which they seemed to embrace the responsibility to facilitate voting.

And, since I was at the Office of the Secretary of the State's Office only on one election night – 2014 – I have no idea what other years brought but it was a shock when we called a particular Registrar, to discover that he had left to get dinner and left no one in his place... on election night! If a Registrar cannot be in place on election night, then when? This is but one of many examples of way Connecticut's voters, and Connecticut's elected officials, and those who hope to some day be elected, deserve a professionalized Registrar system. The permanent staff has had years of such experience; it is just what it is. They have grown to know this as the reality.

I am not naïve. I do understand that, like the probate court issue, this is a thorny problem. I know that it is very hard to tackle because it is at once a local and a statewide issue. I know it has a political element and many "sacred cows" are at stake.

But sacred cows can be no reason to allow this deeply flawed system to persist. The Registrar system we have is simply not good enough for our citizenry. We deserve better. Every time there is a major gaffe with a Registrar – a missing list, someone gone to dinner and not come back – etc. it is likely that somebody didn't get to exercise his or her right to vote. That is not fair or right. And, that can be fixed. That can be fixed by fixing the broken system.

There are a great many inequities in the way we administer voting rights in our nation that we still haven't resolved; but a state like Connecticut not having a professional system for the competent, and efficient administration of elections should not be one of them.

**A system of professional Registrars, as provided for in this legislation, fixes the problem we have here at home. Thoughtfully, thoroughly, and effectively. Thank you.**