



***Office of Chief Public Defender
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TESTIMONY OF SUSAN O. STOREY, CHIEF PUBLIC DEFENDER

Nomination of Chase T. Rogers to be the

Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court

Judiciary Committee Public Hearing

APRIL 10, 2015

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, and Members of the Judiciary Committee, I am here to support the Governor's nomination of Chief Justice Rogers for reappointment. Chief Justice Rodgers has worked tirelessly to make Connecticut courts more accessible to all members of the public in difficult economic times. Upon her appointment, she took immediate action and established the Public Service and Trust Commission in 2007 to develop a strategic plan for the Judicial Branch. She assembled a diverse membership and sought input from the public as well as from practitioners. Upon finalization of the strategic plan, Chief Justice Rogers then established the Access to Justice Commission to execute it. The stated mission of the Connecticut Access to Justice Commission is "to develop recommendations to help ensure equal access for all people, including low and moderate income individuals, people with different physical or mental disabilities, the elderly, limited English proficient and ethnic, cultural and racial minorities." As a member of both committees, I can attest to the dedication and perseverance of the Chief Justice and the Commission members to effectuate this mission.

Under Chief Justice Rogers' leadership, the Judicial Branch Website has been transformed into a site where the public can easily find practical and useful information on how our court system works. The site contains numerous links, documents, and videos to help a layperson navigate and prepare a civil, family, or criminal case. This improvement particularly benefits pro-se litigants, and members of the public with limited English proficiency. With the availability of Language Line, they are now able to access legal assistance in more than 170 different languages in all courthouse clerk and Court Service Centers. Court Services Offices also provide pro-se litigants and members of the public with appropriate court forms, computer access, electronic filing, and other assistance from trained Judicial Branch staff.

In an era where all agency budgets are extremely tight, Chief Justice Rogers has ensured that legal services for the poor are valued as a fundamental right and that they are funded appropriately. Under her leadership, court filing fees have been directed to the legal services nonprofits to ensure that free quality legal advice and representation is available to everyone. In 2013, she also had the vision to form partnerships among diverse groups of stakeholders including CEO's, corporate funders, and the Connecticut Legal Aid organizations to address the lack of legal representation for the poor as an impediment to achieving equal justice in Connecticut courts. As a result, Lawyer Corps Connecticut was formed to close the justice gap by establishing sustainable funding for providing free high quality legal services to Connecticut's poorest residents.

Chief Justice Rogers has been very helpful with other issues that impact the indigent clients of the Office of Chief Public Defender. At the time of her appointment she publicly supported the Raise the Age initiative to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction in Connecticut from 16 to 18 years of age. In 2011, when the legislature merged the Commission on Child Protection with our Division, she met with us to express her support as well as her concerns that such restructuring not disrupt representation of cases in the juvenile court. She stressed that children and families deserved to have their cases addressed in the most efficient manner consistent with the administration of justice. She also emphasized the importance of ensuring expedited appeals in child welfare matters. Her accessibility and advice during that critical time of merging the two agencies was invaluable to the successful transition.

Some advocates for family court reform have alleged that the family courts have operated in a corrupt or abusive fashion and are designed to help private lawyers accumulate exorbitant fees. Our Agency has found the opposite to be true, as judges regularly exercise their authority to appoint lawyers or guardians ad litem for children at state rates in the interests of justice. Additionally, under this Chief Justice, Family Court Mediation programs have been significantly expanded. These programs are extremely important and give parents an opportunity to mediate custody disputes without third party participation thereby reducing the cost of litigation.

Furthermore, during Chief Justice Rogers' term, the comprehensive Judicial Guardian ad Litem Training Program was developed by a coalition of family court practitioners and academics at virtually no cost to the State of Connecticut. There was no such training program prior to Chief Justice Rogers being appointed. Under her leadership, the Judicial Branch has implemented numerous reforms passed by this Legislature in the 2014 Session. Chief Justice Rogers supported that effort and continues to exercise oversight to ensure that the family courts remain places where families can find a just resolution to their most difficult disputes.

We hope that the Judiciary Committee will recognize the decisive action and comprehensive reforms initiated by Chief Justice Rogers to promote access to justice by all members of the public and vote favorably on the Governor's nomination for her reappointment.