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Testimony by Steven Eppler-Epstein
Executive Director
Connecticut Legal Services

In support of the re-nomination of Supreme Court Chief Justice Chase T. Rogers

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbas,
and members of the Committee:

My name is Steve Eppler-Epstein, and I am the executive director of Connecticut Legal Services. I appear before you today on behalf of Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, and New Haven Legal Assistance Association, which between us constitute the field programs providing legal aid to low-income people in urgent civil legal crises, across the State of Connecticut. On behalf of our programs, I urge you to re-nominate Chief Justice Chase Rogers to her position.

I have been a legal aid lawyer for over thirty years, and during that time I have spoken in this building on behalf of low-income people on a variety of issues. But until today I have never before testified on a judicial nomination. I am testifying today because we have the extraordinary circumstance of one of finest public servants in our state – one of the smartest, most generous, most fair-minded and forward-thinking people working for the people of the state of Connecticut, facing an apparent public challenge. And it would be an incredible loss to people of this state if Chief Justice Rogers were not given the opportunity to continue her leadership of our Judiciary.

I expect that you will have received testimony from very experienced lawyers about Chief Justice Rogers' quality as a jurist. Connecticut has a long tradition of having a very high quality Supreme Court, and Chief Justice Rogers has certainly continued in that tradition.

But what has impressed and astonished me about Chief Justice Rogers has been the amount of time and effort she has devoted towards improving access to justice in our state.

- Chief Justice Rogers has been incredibly supportive of access to justice for the poorest people in our state, through her support for funding and staffing in the legal services programs. As most of you know, the Legal



Aid programs have been facing funding shortfalls since the start of the current recession, and we are working this year to restore essential and long-time SSBG funding which would be eliminated under the Governor's budget. The Chief Justice has been steadfast in her support for legal aid funding.

- But the Chief Justice has recognized that the state needs to find additional ways to improve the availability of lawyers for low-income people, and has created two innovative initiatives:
 - First, she created the LawyerCorps initiative, in which major corporations within the state have donated funds for special fellowships for young lawyers to serve low-income people. The very first LawyerCorps lawyer (of three) will start this Monday, and will provide representation to low-income people facing eviction in northwestern Connecticut.
 - Second, the Chief Justice created a Pro Bono Committee to be led by the Judiciary, and has sponsored two Pro Bono Summits. She has used the prestige and influence of her office to encourage individual lawyers and law firms to increase the amount of time they spend, and the number of low-income people they help without any fee being charged. She has been tireless in meeting with law firms and lawyer groups to encourage increased pro bono efforts. Both of these initiatives have been incredibly effective.

- The Chief Justice has also been active to improve access to justice for people beyond the very poor.
 - Her Access To Justice Commission has been exploring support for innovative models of assistance to people who aren't poor, but have limited income, and are seeking access to lawyers.
 - The same Commission, with her encouragement, has been exploring changes the courts can make to improve the efficiency of case handling, particularly with an eye to reducing the amount of time lawyers need to spend on a case, so that it is easier for middle-income people to be able to afford a lawyer.
 - She has directed the Branch to do a thorough evaluation of language access to the courts and court services; this initiative has resulted in much improved training of court staff, improved access to interpreting services (both live and remote), and increased multi-language access of court forms and website resources.
 - She has supported both the courthouse law libraries and the courthouse support centers, both of which have become essential resources for people who are going to court without a lawyer.
 - Under her guidance, the Judicial Branch website has been expanded to include much more information for people who cannot afford a lawyer, and the website's contents have been improved to include video and other multi-media resources.

- The Chief Justice has also focused on transparency, making sure that every meeting and every decision of Judicial rules, task forces and Committees are posted on the website for anyone interested.

I know – and you know, and Chief Justice Rogers certainly knows – that our justice system can be improved. She has seen that not as a permanent flaw, but as a challenge and an opportunity. Compared to any other period I have witnessed in my professional career, Chief Justice Rogers' tenure has marked a remarkable period of concern for access to justice for every person in the state – and her openness to new ideas and change, along with her dedication of her own time towards new initiatives, demonstrates how much our state has benefited from her interest in constant improvement to our judicial system.

I would urge you not to lose the benefit of this progress. I know of no one in this state who could match Chief Justice Rogers' combination of passion for justice, openness to new ideas, practical ability to get things done, and hard work on behalf of the people of this state. It would be to the detriment of everyone in this room if she were not to be re-appointed; and conversely we all will benefit from the work she can continue if you support her renomination.

Thank you for your time.